



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



TUESDAY — 21 DEC 2021

	International	National	Regional and Local
Events, Opportunities Go to articles	12/21 WHO chief warns over festive gatherings 12/21 Thailand reinstates mandatory quarantine 12/21 New year 'too late' for extra UK covid rules? 12/21 New Zealand, Asia Pacific nations scramble 12/21 Israel's role in Iran Quds general killing 12/21 Putin: military to counter NATO threat 12/21 Kremlin militarizing Russian society 12/20 Europe: crackdown or wait-and-see? 12/20 EU agency authorizes Novavax vaccine 12/20 European leaders weigh tougher measures 12/20 China access to global shipping data 12/20 New Syria migrants seek Europe 12/20 Philippine typhoon death toll rises 12/20 NKorea: decade under Kim Jong Un 12/20 Drones tip balance in Ethiopia civil war 12/20 Tigray rebels to withdraw Ethiopia regions 12/20 Russia warns of military action on Ukraine	12/21 Schools ready next big Covid surge? 12/20 Omicron strains Covid testing capacity 12/20 Omicron fuels a rise in cases; surging 12/20 Houston: first US omicron variant death 12/20 Sniffle anxiety: is it a cold or is it Covid? 12/20 CDC: omicron already dominant variant 12/20 Omicron surge, restrictions in Northeast 12/20 D.C. mayor declares state of emergency 12/20 Omicron, staff shortages disrupt schools 12/20 Mixed Covid response down to geography 12/20 NHL pauses play amid rapid rise of omicron 12/20 CDC adds 8 places to highest risk category 12/20 Rally exhausted Americans against omicron 12/20 Stocks, oil fall on new Covid curbs 12/20 EPA tightest-ever auto pollution rules 12/20 Court adds to ban contractor vaccine rule 12/20 DHS to plug border wall 'gaps' 12/20 Schools: threats, social media hoaxes 12/20 Pentagon roots out extremism in military 12/20 CBP: 10% increase border crossers in Nov. 12/20 NWS: Dec. 15 storms classified as derecho 12/20 'Scary' 6.2mag quake northern Calif. coast 12/20 Recall: Proctor & Gamble haircare products	12/20 DOH: 805,831 cases, 9695 deaths 12/20 FEMA vaccine clinic in Federal Way 12/20 Demand for Covid tests soar across WA 12/20 Expected: rise of omicron variant in Seattle 12/20 Legislature sues governor again 12/20 Food prices high ahead of holidays 12/20 Seattle crews clear homeless encampment 12/20 Tacoma approves police 7.1% pay increase 12/20 Snow arrives: possibility w/more Christmas
Cyber Awareness Go to articles	12/21 Report: crypto-criminals net \$7.7B in 2021 12/21 UK shares 225M passwords to breach site 12/21 British Council hit by ransomware attacks 12/20 China disappears top online influencer 12/20 Confidential UK police data on dark web 12/20 Belgian defense ministry confirms attack 12/20 Cyberattack impacts Australia companies 12/20 Attacks shut building automation systems	12/20 US, UK aid Ukraine cybersecurity 12/20 Evil Corp is dodging US sanctions 12/20 New Log4j attack vector discovered 12/20 Meta sues operators of phishing sites 12/20 FBI: state hackers exploit Zoho zero-day 12/20 Hackers can penetrate 93% local networks 12/20 T-Mobile: 21B scam calls blocked this year 12/20 Russian extradited: illegal hacking, trading 12/20 Bitcoin 1% control outsized share of wealth	
Terror Conditions Go to articles	12/21 France kills regional IS group leader 12/21 Children used in deadly rampage for gold 12/20 New jihadists and the Taliban model	12/20 Charge: Kentucky man joined ISIS 12/20 Guilty plea: intentional derailing of train	
Suspicious, Unusual Go to articles	12/20 Himalayan glaciers melting at furious rate	12/20 Cursing more? Blame the #\$\$ pandemic	12/20 Study: melting Arctic link to fall fire weather
Crime, Criminals Go to articles	12/20 Mexico seizes meth, fentanyl soar 12/20 Interpol: illicit trafficking of firearms 12/20 Haiti missionaries in dramatic escape 12/20 As Europe returns artifacts, Britain silent 12/20 Osaka arson suspect copied Kyoto attack? 12/20 El Chapo sons organize drug cartel festival	12/21 Secret Service: pandemic fraud near \$100B 12/20 Lead Capitol riot charge constitutional 12/20 Chicago mayor to federal govt: send help 12/20 Study: underserved areas gun crime rise 12/20 Charges falter: professors working w/China	12/20 Separate shootings in Tacoma: 2 dead 12/20 Judge excoriates ex-King Co. detective 12/20 Seattle man jailed 46mo. in Capitol riot role 12/20 Spokane PD chief suspends anti-crime team

[DISCLAIMER and FAIR USE Notice](#)

Events, Opportunities

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Schools: threats, social media hoaxes
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/12/20/school-threats-oxford-shooting-tiktok/
GIST	Nine days after the mass shooting at Michigan's Oxford High School, a disturbing message on social media shook a tiny Virginia town. A 15-year-old boy wrote of "shooting up the school tomorrow," police

say, apparently referring to the high school he attended — spurring worried classmates to report the message to Manassas Park City Schools administrators.

School officials contacted the police, setting in motion a full-scale investigation, and the school system decided on a fairly drastic step — closing all campuses, not just the targeted school, for all of its 3,500 students the next day.

“Out of an abundance of caution, we switched all schools to virtual learning,” said schools spokeswoman Kara Grasser. “The immediate information we received was not specific. ... We are a very small school system with only four schools.”

It was one among hundreds of examples of school systems grappling with how to respond to vague threats afloat on social media in the wake of the tragedy at Oxford High, [which left four dead and seven seriously injured](#). These kinds of disturbing messages are spiking in the D.C. area and nationwide: At least 60 schools in Michigan closed this month in the wake of the Oxford shooting, as did districts in Ohio and Pennsylvania. And in a “challenge” last week that swept the social network TikTok, students promoted school shootings to take place on Dec. 17 — for many, the last day of class before winter break. Schools from D.C. to California closed for the day or added police.

More than 150 threats surfaced nationwide in just the week after Oxford, said James Densley, a professor of criminal justice at Metropolitan State University and a co-founder of the Violence Project. By comparison, Densley, who tracks news reports, recorded 151 school threats for the entire month of September this year — itself a fivefold increase over the number seen in a typical September, he said.

Every threat sets off alarm bells, putting staffers, parents and students on edge — and forcing administrators to make a choice. Should they close schools, an option that is more attractive in a post-pandemic world in which many students can learn from home? Or should they take a risk in an effort to minimize learning disruption? Assessing the danger of each threat is not always obvious.

For Jason Enix, superintendent of the Reading Community City School District just outside Cincinnati, the decision was clear. When a social media post surfaced earlier this month promising a student was going to “shoot up the school,” Enix opted to have students learn virtually the next day. “It was an easy call to make,” he said. “We would make that call every single time.”

But when Daniel McGarry, superintendent of the Upper Darby School District in Pennsylvania, faced a similar situation in early December, before the Oxford attack, he kept students learning in a “lock-in” scenario, under which teachers continue teaching but nobody is allowed to leave their classroom. “Our last resort is to close schools,” McGarry said.

Experts are similarly conflicted — emphasizing the need to err on the side of caution but warning of possible downsides.

“I think we have to take every single threat very seriously right now — it doesn’t matter how it might seem innocuous,” said Laurel Thompson, who is on the board of the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) and was involved in the response to the 2018 shooting at Parkland High School in Florida. “We never know which one is going to be the one. We never want to make a mistake.”

Amy Klinger, founder and director of programs for the Educator’s School Safety Network, commended schools for taking threats seriously. But she said she would like to see fewer campus shutdowns, because a return to virtual learning can cause trauma and anxiety for students who suffered in that environment during the pandemic. And, she warned, school closures could lead to even more threats surfacing on social media.

“A kid could think, ‘I made a threat and it worked, we don’t have school, so I’m going to do that again,’” Klinger said. “And copycats create copycats and you get into this cycle of threat closure, threat closure, threat closure, so it’s very difficult.”

‘Fake accounts ... fake threats’

The threats run the gamut.

In Virginia’s Chesterfield County, students began sharing an Instagram post in early December that promised a “school riot” the next day, slated to take place during third period. Ultimately deemed not credible by authorities, the threat nonetheless led school officials to [request greater police presence at their campuses](#) and spurred several principals to call or write letters to families.

In New Haven, Conn., a high school closed early on Dec. 6 when [a 911 caller warned that someone was approaching the campus with a gun](#). Police say the girl who made the call admitted lying, was arrested and is now facing felony charges.

And when ominous rumors spread on TikTok of a possible day of shootings nationwide this past Friday, administrators struggled to understand how real they were. In Maryland’s Howard County, for instance, they wrote a message to families of “a new TikTok challenge encouraging students to make school shooting threats to schools” and asked parents to urge their children not to participate.

“At this point, there are no credible threats,” the message said. “However, even hoax threats create fear and cause disruption to the school community.”

McGarry, the Pennsylvania superintendent, said it has become enormously difficult to tell real promises of violence from false ones. He said his staff has recently had to work after hours, on weekends and through holidays to help track down threats.

“You can get a picture of a picture sent out on social media,” McGarry said. “We are seeing fake accounts, dummy accounts, fake threats.”

For example, McGarry said, an Upper Darby student showed up to the main office in early December with a picture of what they said looked like another student in one of the district’s high schools holding a shotgun. Someone had messaged the student the image, terrifying the student into believing someone was coming to shoot them, McGarry said.

School officials who examined the picture did not recognize him. And the weapon he was holding looked more like a BB gun, McGarry said. Nonetheless the school system called the police, went into a partial lockdown, alerted parents and designated a team of staffers to help law enforcement uncover the truth.

McGarry said the photo turned out to be a picture of “a kid from another community somewhere else,” with no ties to Upper Darby, holding a pellet gun. And police determined the person who sent the message was not an Upper Darby student.

Thompson, of the SSWAA, said some teens make school threats out of a desire to mimic tragedies they have seen on the news. But, she said, other threats stem from genuine pain — and represent yet another lingering legacy of the pandemic, which has left children across the country scarred by personal tragedy, economic uncertainty, the sudden shuttering of desperately needed support systems or all three.

“For many students, their mental health situation — unrecognized, untreated — might turn to violence as a way for them to express themselves,” Thompson said.

Of course, some threats are not hoaxes. And some threats, even if impossible to carry out, have very real roots in student distress.

In Virginia’s Manassas Park, Grasser said that school officials worked in tandem with police throughout the night to track down the student who posted the threat, relying on Instagram accounts and Internet protocol (IP) addresses. Just after midnight, Manassas Park police identified the teen and took him and his parents to police headquarters, [authorities said](#).

Police then searched the family's home, with the cooperation of the teen's parents, and found no firearms. Police arrested and charged the 15-year-old last week, placing him in custody at the Prince William County Juvenile Detention Center.

'DO NOT GO this is important'

As a flood of threats continue to inundate schools, some are trying to develop longer-term solutions.

State Sen. Jennifer L. McClellan (D-Richmond) put forward a bill last week that would add an extra billion dollars per year in state funding for school support personnel such as nurses. About \$50 million of that money would specifically go to mental health personnel, school social workers and counselors, McClellan said in an interview.

She is aiming to reduce the ratios of students to mental health staffers — advocating to have one school counselor for every 250 students at every Virginia school campus, for example. McClellan said that she plans to introduce the bill when the Senate goes into session on Jan. 12 and that she is hopeful it will receive bipartisan support.

"We're seeing a spike in school threats on top of a spike in trauma [that] these kids are carrying from last year that has not been addressed," McClellan said. "There's been so much stress on these kids. ... We owe it to our kids and our communities to meet their needs."

In the meantime, though, school officials continue to face fast-developing and swiftly changing crises, forcing them to make quick judgment calls in situations in which there are few if any right answers.

Wendell Hissrich, public safety director for the city of Pittsburgh, said nine schools within the city limits and seven more in suburban areas received at least one threat, typically through social media, in the weeks before and after the Oxford shooting. Officials often opted to cancel classes for the day in the face of those threats, he said.

"That's a little easier in this day and age," he said. "They have the mechanism to learn from home. Years ago, that wasn't the case."

In the Reading district in Ohio in mid-November, "a trickle, then a flood" of reports came into the district about a social media post warning of violence at school, Enix said.

The post declared: "Everyone going to Reading school tomorrow, please I beg you don't go to school tomorrow, there is a risk that one of the students will shoot up the school tomorrow just take precaution and DO NOT GO this is important."

Police immediately launched an investigation and deemed it a credible threat, Enix said. By 9 p.m., the district had decided to close schools the next day. Police arrested a student later that evening.

Enix said the district regularly runs tabletop exercises and drills to prepare for situations like this. He said he thinks his team would have handled it exactly the same way even if the Oxford shooting was not fresh in people's memories. It wasn't "a hard decision," he said, "because we've talked about these things before."

"The truth is," Enix added, "if we hadn't closed school, I'm not sure how many students or staff would have been here that day."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/21 Putin: military to counter NATO threat
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/putin-warns-he-s-ready-to-use-military-to-counter-nato-challenge/ar-AAS18W7

GIST	<p>(Bloomberg) -- President Vladimir Putin threatened a military response to counter NATO expansion toward Russia's border, while insisting he wasn't issuing an ultimatum as he heaped blame on the U.S. for rising tensions in Europe.</p> <p>The U.S. and its allies "must understand that we have nowhere to retreat further" and Russia can't allow them to deploy missiles in Ukraine that would be a few minutes' strike distance from Moscow, Putin told senior officers Tuesday at the Russian Defense Ministry. "This is at the doorstep of our home."</p> <p>Russia will "take adequate military-technical response measures and react harshly to unfriendly steps" by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Putin said, without elaborating on a phrase that could refer to weapons deployments. "Armed conflict and bloodshed are absolutely not our choice," he said. "We want to resolve the question by political and diplomatic means."</p> <p>Putin hit out after Russia demanded last week that NATO withdraw forces to the positions they held in 1997, before the alliance expanded to include former Soviet satellite states in eastern Europe, as part of proposed new security treaties. The U.S. and Europe accuse Russia of a massive build-up of troops near Ukraine in preparation for a possible invasion as early as next month, something Russia denies.</p> <p>If U.S. and NATO missiles appear in Ukraine "the flight time to Moscow will be reduced to 7-10 minutes, and if hypersonic weapons are deployed - to within 5 minutes," Putin said. "This is a serious challenge for us, a challenge for our security."</p> <p>NATO says it's a defensive body and its deployments in member states have come in response to threats from Russia. While the alliance has said the door is open to Ukraine for eventual membership, there's little prospect of that happening any time soon. There are no proposals from the U.S. or NATO to place missiles in Ukraine or deploy troops there.</p> <p>Russia sees potential risks to its territory and Crimea, which it annexed in 2014, if the U.S. placed hypersonic missiles in Ukraine then allowed "extremists" there to carry out attacks, Putin told the officers. "Do they think we don't see these threats?" he said.</p> <p>While there are "signals" the U.S. is ready to discuss Russia's proposals, there's also a risk that Washington will try to bog down negotiations, Putin said.</p> <p>Russia can't trust security guarantees offered by the U.S. because Washington easily walks away from its commitments, the president said. Still, "clearly stated" written guarantees are better than oral ones, he said.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/21 Schools ready next big Covid surge?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/us/covid-schools.html
GIST	<p>The dread was familiar.</p> <p>As news spread of the latest coronavirus surge, fueled in large part by the Omicron variant, parents faced a return to the drudgery of school through a screen, child care crises and restless young bodies, penned inside for the winter.</p> <p>In Manhattan, Olivia Strong received an email from her son's public middle school on Monday, informing her that his cohort of eighth graders would transition to remote learning because of multiple positive virus cases.</p> <p>"I was not even slightly surprised; I fully expected it," she said, sighing deeply. Her hope, she added, was that a short break to reset would allow schools to reopen more safely in the new year.</p> <p>Districts have mostly reassured families that despite targeted classroom closures to contain spread of the virus, they plan to continue in-person learning until the Christmas break and reopen as planned in January.</p>

New York City, Boston and Montgomery County, Md., in suburban Washington, were among the large school systems that said they would not shift districtwide to remote learning, or would do so only if forced to by public health officials.

Still, the alarming spread of the virus could expose the rickety infrastructure that has kept schools running through most of this year. Many schools are still in need of substitute teachers and bus drivers, and can ill afford an outbreak that would send even more staff members home. There still are not enough rapid tests to quickly screen whole classrooms or schools. And some districts may have a tough time meeting demand for online learning as children are quarantined or concerned parents choose to keep them home.

School officials must simultaneously address the devastating impact of the pandemic on students: academic deficits, mental health struggles and labor shortages.

“This is going to be a winter of challenging choices for schools, but closure cannot be the default,” said Robin Lake, director of the [Center on Reinventing Public Education](#), a think tank that has studied district responses to Covid-19.

Despite targeted classroom closures to contain spread of the virus, things have gone relatively smoothly for schools. Across the nation’s 13,000 districts and 98,000 public schools this week, there are about 600 shuttered schools or districts, according to [data from Burbio](#), a company that has tracked how schools have operated through the pandemic. There are fewer closures now than in November.

And school outbreaks remain limited, as they have been throughout the pandemic.

New York City, the nation’s largest district and the one currently most threatened by the Omicron variant, has 1,600 schools; [four are currently closed](#) because of virus cases, with an additional 44 under investigation.

In a Friday [radio interview](#), Mayor Bill de Blasio noted that the coronavirus test positivity rate in the city’s schools was 1 percent while the citywide community positivity rate was over 5 percent.

The picture had been bright enough that many schools relaxed virus restrictions in recent weeks.

Several school districts in Florida [dropped their mask mandates](#). New Jersey [relaxed school quarantine rules](#), decoupling them from community transmission rates and reducing the number of stay-at-home days for students who had close contact with an infected person.

And in Missouri, the attorney general, a Republican, [sent a letter](#) to districts directing them to drop mask mandates and quarantine requirements after a circuit court judge ruled that such measures violated the State Constitution. Several districts are resisting, a sign perhaps that there may be political dissension after the holidays, when schools weigh whether to reopen classrooms after family gatherings that will almost certainly make the current surge more severe.

Washington, D.C., has already extended its vacation by two days, [directing families](#) to pick up rapid tests at schools and test students before returning them to the classroom.

Prince George’s County, in suburban Maryland, announced a [shift to remote learning](#) until mid-January after [three of the district’s 208 schools](#) shut down last week because of virus spread.

But Prince George’s is an outlier; the political will to keep schools open is notable given that many of the states experiencing the heaviest virus case loads are in the Northeast and Midwest, which have powerful teachers’ unions. They spent much of the pandemic fighting for strict mitigation measures and longer periods of remote learning.

This time, union leaders in New York, Boston and Philadelphia said they were not asking for districtwide remote learning, and were instead focused on pushing administrators to enforce virus mitigation measures.

But in an interview on Friday, the vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union, Stacy Davis Gates, did not rule out pushing for a period of remote learning after the holidays.

She argued that the district's contact tracing efforts had been sluggish and that the city should make greater efforts to vaccinate students and parents on school grounds and provide families with free, at-home rapid tests.

Several schools, she said, already had to contend with large numbers of absent staff members because of the virus. "At what number do you say it's unsafe for people to be in the building without X number of adults?" she asked.

Chicago Public Schools said in a written statement that after the holiday break, which began on Friday, it would restart a free, weekly P.C.R. testing program at schools and would "push to urge families to consent to testing."

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [encouraged schools](#) on Friday to reduce quarantines and closures by using a protocol known as test-to-stay, in which close contacts are given frequent rapid tests; only those who test positive must stay home.

Many districts do not have a sufficient supply of such tests, however, nor the staffing to widely administer them. Chicago has piloted test-to-stay in a single elementary school. Boston Public Schools said last week it had hired an outside staffing agency to help fill open nursing positions.

Another challenge is that many parents have not given consent for their children to be tested for the virus at school. Some teachers' unions have urged districts to shift from a protocol of parental opt-in to one of parental opt-out.

"If there is a positive case in a class, everyone should just get tested," Erik Berg, vice president of the Boston Teachers Union, said. "If our universities and colleges can test everyone on campus twice per week, it says a lot about the commitment to K-12 education that we can't even test people we know were in the same room with a positive case for six or seven hours."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/21 New Zealand, Asia Pacific nations scramble
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/world/australia/new-zealand-omicron-response.html
GIST	<p>New Zealand said on Tuesday that it was pushing back a phased opening of its borders to the end of February, in another indication of how countries throughout the Asia Pacific region are scrambling to respond to the threat of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>New Zealand also postponed its plans to allow its citizens living in Australia to return without quarantining starting on Jan. 17. Now the program will not start until the end of February.</p> <p>New Zealand has detected 22 cases of Omicron in international arrivals, but no community cases of the variant have been reported. In the event of an outbreak, the government intends to replace lockdowns of the past with more targeted measures, Chris Hipkins, the Covid-19 response minister, said.</p> <p>"It's not our intention to move to lockdowns unless that is absolutely necessary in the event of a widespread outbreak, where our health system becomes under considerable strain and the overall health risk becomes too much to bear," he said.</p> <p>In other measures to limit the new variant's eventual spread, the government said that residents would get access to a booster shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine sooner — at four months instead of six — after their second shot.</p>

New Zealand is one of several countries in the region that are tightening restrictions or considering tougher quarantine rules as cases of the variant rise.

In Japan, which [closed its borders](#) to all nonresident foreigners last month, an outbreak of 180 cases at an American military base has also raised fears of a resurgence. The virus was first detected at the base on the southern island of Okinawa on Friday, the authorities said, adding that it was unclear how many of those people had been sickened by Omicron. The government has asked the United States to increase restrictions on and around the base, a top Japanese health official [said on Monday](#).

Just a few weeks after reopening to foreign tourists, Thailand said on Tuesday that it was pausing its quarantine-free travel program until Jan. 4 because of concern about the variant.

In Indonesia, where only 40 percent of the population is fully vaccinated against the coronavirus, the government has banned entry by foreign nationals from several countries in Africa and Europe. The government has said it is considering increasing the quarantine period for Indonesian citizens arriving from those countries to 14 days from 10, [local news outlets reported](#).

And in Australia, the Omicron variant is coursing through the community and has even reached Yulara, a remote community more than 1,000 miles south of the nearest coastal city, Darwin. Two workers who had flown there from Brisbane tested positive, the health authorities said on Tuesday.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison insisted, however, that the country would not return to harsh lockdowns.

“Yes, we’re going to need to continue to calibrate how we manage this virus and how we live with this virus in the face of Omicron,” Mr. Morrison said on Tuesday. But, he added: “We’re not going back to lockdowns. We’re not going back to shutting down people’s lives.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/21 Kremlin militarizing Russian society
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/world/europe/russia-military-putin-kremlin.html
GIST	<p>MOSCOW — Stepping onto a podium in heavy boots and military fatigues at a ceremony outside Moscow, six teenagers accepted awards for an increasingly important discipline in Russia: patriotism.</p> <p>For days, students from around the country had competed in activities like map-reading, shooting and history quizzes. The contest was funded in part by the Kremlin, which has been making “military patriotic” education a priority.</p> <p>“Parents and children understand that this aggressive shell around us, it is tightening, it is hardening,” said Svyatoslav Omelchenko, a special forces veteran of the K.G.B. who founded Vympel, the group running the event. “We are doing all we can to make sure that children are aware of that and to get them ready to go and serve.”</p> <p>Over the past eight years, the Russian government has promoted the idea that the motherland is surrounded by enemies, filtering the concept through national institutions like schools, the military, the news media and the Orthodox Church. It has even raised the possibility that the country might again have to defend itself as it did against the Nazis in World War II.</p> <p>Now, as Russia masses troops on the Ukrainian border, spurring Western fears of an impending invasion, the steady militarization of Russian society under President Vladimir V. Putin suddenly looms large, and appears to have inured many to the idea that a fight could be coming.</p> <p>“The authorities are actively selling the idea of war,” Dmitri A. Muratov, the Russian newspaper editor who shared the Nobel Peace Prize this year, said in his acceptance speech in Oslo this month. “People are getting used to the thought of its permissibility.”</p>

While there is no surging war fever taking hold, there are plenty of signs that the government has been nurturing a readiness for conflict. A \$185 million four-year program started by the Kremlin this year aims to drastically increase Russians' "patriotic education," including a plan to attract at least 600,000 children as young as 8 to join the ranks of a uniformed [Youth Army](#). Adults get their inculcation from state television, where political shows — one is called "Moscow. Kremlin. Putin." — drive home the narrative of a fascist coup in Ukraine and a West bent on Russia's destruction.

And all are united by the near-sacred memory of Soviet victory in World War II — one that the state has seized upon to shape an identity of a triumphal Russia that must be ready to take up arms once more.

Aleksei Levinson, the head of sociocultural research at the Levada Center, an independent Moscow pollster, calls the trend the "militarization of the consciousness" of Russians. In the center's regular surveys, the army in 2018 became the country's most trusted institution, surpassing even the president. This year, the share of Russians saying they feared a world war hit the highest level recorded in surveys dating to 1994 — 62 percent.

This does not mean, Mr. Levinson cautioned, that Russians would welcome a bloody territorial conquest of Ukraine. But it does mean, he said, that many have been conditioned to accept that Russia is locked in an existential rivalry with other powers in which the use of force is a possibility.

Celebration of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in World War II — referred to as the Great Patriotic War in Russia — has played the most important role in that conditioning. Rather than promoting only a culture of remembrance of Soviet heroism and 27 million lives lost, the Kremlin applies the World War II narrative to the present day, positioning Russia as once again threatened by enemies bent on its destruction.

In his annual Victory Day speech this year after a monumental military parade, Mr. Putin tore into unnamed present-day enemies of Russia who were redeploying the Nazis' "delusional theory of their exclusivity." On state TV last week, a news show host ridiculed sanctions threats against Russia from those "who have no idea how to scare a people that lost more than 20 million of its men, its women and its elderly and kids in the last war."

A popular World War II bumper sticker reads, "We can do it again."

"There's a transposition taking place of this victory" — in World War II — "into the present-day confrontation with the NATO bloc," Mr. Levinson said.

One hour west of Moscow, the grand Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces opened last year. Its exterior is army green and its floors are made from weapons and tanks seized from the German Wehrmacht. Arched stained glass windows feature insignia and medals.

On a recent Sunday, the church and its accompanying museum and park were full of visitors. A group of fifth graders from the Suvorov Military School in Tver, wearing their uniforms, filed out in two lines before marching to the museum. Their instructor said it was fundamentally important for the students, in their first year of military school, to learn about their predecessors.

"We're doing a bit of propaganda, too," the section leader quipped, declining to give his name.

Beyond the church grounds, visitors walked among snow-covered trenches in a simulated front line. Further afield, under the towering dome of the church, children could ride around a go-kart like track in a miniature replica of a battle tank.

"All children should come here and develop an interest in history from an early age," said Alina Grengolm, as her 2-year-old son scrambled up an icy tank with his father's assistance.

In Moscow recently, more than 600 people from across Russia gathered for a government-sponsored forum aimed at promoting patriotism among youth. Sergei Kiriyenko, Mr. Putin's powerful deputy chief of staff, praised the attendees for doing "sacred work."

At the conference, two "victory volunteers" spoke about their plans for teaching high school students about the Russian World War II victory at a regional event the following week.

In a Levada poll published last week, 39 percent of Russians said war between Russia and Ukraine was either inevitable or very likely. Half said the United States and NATO were to blame for the recent rise in tensions, and no more than 4 percent — across all age groups — said Russia was at fault.

The conviction across society that Russia is not the aggressor reflects a core ideology dating to Soviet times: that the country only fights defensive wars. The government has even earmarked money for movies that explore that theme: In April, the Culture Ministry decreed that "Russia's historical victories" and "Russia's peacekeeping mission" were among the priority topics for film producers seeking government funding.

"Right now, the idea is being pushed that Russia is a peace-loving country permanently surrounded by enemies," said Anton Dolin, a Russian film critic. "This is contradicted by some facts, but if you show it at the movies and translate that idea into the time of the Great Patriotic War, we all instantly get a scheme familiar to everyone from childhood."

On Russian state television, the narrative of a Ukraine controlled by neo-Nazis and used as a staging ground for Western aggression has been a common trope since the pro-Western revolution in Kyiv in 2014. After the revolution, Russia annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, fomented a war in Ukraine's east and sharpened its messaging about Russia as a "besieged fortress."

Some analysts fear that the escalating rhetoric is laying the foundation for what Russia would cast as a defensive intervention to protect its security and Russian speakers in Ukraine. Yevgeny Popov, a newly elected member of Parliament and a host of a popular political show on state TV, said in an interview that his ratings were up in recent weeks — "the tension is rising," he said.

"I think that most people in Russia would only be in favor if we defended Russian people who live in these territories," Mr. Popov said, referring to the separatist territories in Ukraine where hundreds of thousands have received Russian citizenship.

The effectiveness of the state's militarized messaging is up for debate. Polls show that young people have a more positive view of the West than older Russians, and the pro-Kremlin sentiment prompted by the Crimea annexation appears to have dissipated amid economic stagnation.

But the Kremlin is doubling down. Its drive to increase "patriotic education" includes funding for groups like Vympel. The "military patriotic" organization has some 100 chapters around the country, and it organized the recent skills competition in the city of Vladimir that ended on Thursday.

Veronika Osipova, 17, from the city of Rostov-on-Don near Ukraine's border, won the award for best female student. For years, she played the harp, graduating with honors from an elite music school. But in 2015, she started learning how to shoot a machine gun and throw grenades. She resolved to join the Russian military to protect the country against its enemies.

"I follow the example of girls who, under bullets and grenades, went to fight during the Great Patriotic War," Ms. Osipova said. "They had no choice, but we do have it, and I choose the army."

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/pockets-snow-fall-with-some-possible-christmas/QR3UUT3YN5HTFA3THZGHEDGAJQ/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Snow and wet snow fell in some parts of Western Washington Monday morning, with the possibility of more on Christmas Day.</p> <p>Most of us will just see rain, but snow is possible across the region Monday. There were reports of snow or wet snow around and below 400 feet elevation. Snow was seen falling in West Seattle, and viewers reported snow in Federal Way, Hobart, Purdy, Port Orchard, Shelton and Sammamish, among other areas.</p> <p>Little to no accumulation is expected in most areas, but there could be some slushy accumulation at around 500 to 1,000 feet. Temperatures are in the mid to upper-30s and shouldn't cool off much more. The front will move north to around the Everett area, staying mainly dry north of there with breezy north wind.</p> <p>Highs on Monday will be in the upper-30s and lower-40s with rain sticking around until this evening and then tapering off.</p> <p>There is a Winter Weather Advisory in the Cascades where around 5 to 10 inches of snow will fall, with the higher totals south of Stevens Pass.</p> <p>On Tuesday, there will be a few showers around in the low-40s. Look for rain to increase late Tuesday through Wednesday with warmer conditions. By Thursday and Friday, we'll cool off quite a bit with some scattered snow or wet snow showers.</p> <p>We'll cool off even more on Christmas Day and Sunday, when some snow is possible. Totals and snow locations are up in the air at the moment, but some snow showers are possible.</p> <p>The bigger story is the cool down with highs in the upper-30s on Christmas Day and low-30s the day after.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/20 Food prices high ahead of holidays
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/food-prices-hit-highs-ahead-holidays/NU7SYHF2JNCPVC7FIPSMSRCMRU/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — New numbers from the Consumer Price Index show it is getting more expensive to eat out and dine in, as food gets more expensive than it has decades.</p> <p>According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, over the last 12 months, prices at restaurants have gone up 5.8% – a spike that hasn't been seen since the early 80s.</p> <p>During that same time frame, prices at grocery stores have gone even higher, a 6.4% increase – last seen in 2008.</p> <p>Experts attribute the spike to the pandemic-prompted supply chain issues.</p> <p>As grocers deal with higher costs for commodities, workers and transportation – so do you.</p> <p>“I’m not happy, but what can I do?” said Debbie Adatto as she unloaded her groceries into her car outside of a Seattle grocery store. “I just have to adjust and kind of calm down, and budget.”</p> <p>Based on current projections the price hikes will likely last into 2022.</p> <p>The higher cost of food is part of a larger trend – Consumer Price Inflation hit a 39-year high following a 6.8% increase over the last 12-months.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/20 Legislature sues governor again
----------	--

SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/washington-legislature-sues-inslee-again-over-veto-power
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. (AP) — Washington lawmakers are suing Gov. Jay Inslee for the second time over allegedly exceeding his veto power.</p> <p>The Northwest News Network reported Monday that the lawsuit is in response to the governor line-item vetoing parts of the state transportation budget and eliminating a subsection of a low carbon fuels bill earlier this year.</p> <p>Generally, the governor is limited to vetoing entire bills, entire sections of bills or whole appropriation items in a budget bill.</p> <p>The lawsuit seeks to have Inslee's vetoes invalidated and the language he struck resurrected.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 FEMA vaccine clinic in Federal Way
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/fema-vaccine-clinic-opens-in-federal-way-as-covid-19-cases-rise
GIST	<p>FEDERAL WAY, Wash. - A partnership between FEMA and local health authorities has allows a new vaccine site to open in South King County.</p> <p>On Monday, a mobile vaccine clinic opened up inside the Federal Way Performing Arts & Event Center that is expected to be able to deliver up to 500 vaccine doses. The clinic can administer shots for children and adults, and the shots can be first, second or even booster shots.</p> <p>Organizers say that South King County is a trouble-spot in terms of vaccine rate, and ongoing COVID-19 infections.</p> <p>"We scheduled the clinic to run in the afternoon and evening so that families, especially in South King County can get their kids here -- or come after their jobs," said Dr. Mark Del Beccaro.</p> <p>According to Del Beccaro, South King County has a larger number of in-person workers that have struggled to get shots. The hope is to run the clinic through Jan. 4 in Federal Way, before moving the site to Auburn.</p> <p>Lisa Kerr was among the first 100 people who got a shot on Monday, she told FOX 13 that she'd struggled for quite some time to find a place to get a booster shot.</p> <p>"I would have had to wait closer to the end of the month to get it at one of the standard pharmacies," she said.</p> <p>While South King County has lagged behind in vaccine rate, boosters are hard everywhere. On Monday, Mayor Jenny Durkan noted that the City of Seattle had one of the higher vaccination rates in the country, yet only 50% of people eligible for a booster had gotten one yet.</p> <p>UW Medicine's Alex Greniger said that dating back to last week, 70% of COVID-19 cases discovered through their testing sites were linked to the omicron variant.</p> <p>"Starting this week we're expecting almost all positives will be omicron, as well as, an increase in overall cases," said Dr. Greninger.</p> <p>Federal officials stated on Monday that the omicron variant has become the dominant strain throughout the country – CDC numbers show a nearly six-fold increase in infections in the past week alone. With holiday travel set to increase with Christmas and New Year's Eve around the corner, doctors are getting more concerned about what comes next.</p>

	<p>"Omicron is spreading super-fast," said Dr. Del Beccaro. "Even though you might still get COVID if you're vaccinated, by all indications your illness will be really mild. The people who are ending up in the hospital, and unfortunately dying, are almost all unvaccinated."</p> <p>You can schedule a COVID-19 vaccine at the Federal Way Performing Arts & Event Center through the Washington DOH website. Walk-ins are allowed, but organizers say that they can't guarantee shots without an appointment.</p> <p>Dates and locations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> December 20 – January 3 at the Federal Way Performing Arts and Events Center, 31510 Pete von Reichbauer Way S, Federal Way, WA 98003. Park for free in the Performing Arts Center lot and enter through the building's main entrance. January 5 – January 20 at the Auburn GSA, 2701 C street SW, Auburn, WA 98001. Appointments at both sites available 2 PM to 9 PM, seven days a week (closed on 12/24, 12/25, 12/31, 1/1, 1/4, and 1/17).
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 DOH: 805,831 cases, 9695 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article256748217.html
GIST	<p>The Washington State Department of Health reported 1,462 new COVID-19 cases Monday and 21 deaths since Friday.</p> <p>As of Monday, statewide totals from the illness caused by the coronavirus are 805,831 cases and 9,695 deaths. The case total includes 97,775 infections listed as probable. Death data is considered complete only through Dec. 3. DOH revises previous case and death counts daily.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 Tacoma approves police 7.1% pay increase
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article256737862.html
GIST	<p>Tacoma Police Department officers will see a 7.1 percent pay increase starting 2022, costing the city about \$6.8 million.</p> <p>Tacoma City Council approved a three-year contract agreement with the Tacoma Police Union Local 6 on Dec. 14, outlining the pay increase for more than 300 full-time positions.</p> <p>The new contract also includes a retroactive pay increase for officers of 6.1 percent for 2021 at a cost of about \$3.8 million.</p> <p>Starting in 2023, wages will be increased by 100 percent of the June-to-June Consumer Price index for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers (CPI-W) for the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue area, with a minimum increase of 1 percent up to a maximum of 5 percent, totaling about \$9 million.</p> <p>Wages for the Professional Public Safety Management Association (PPSMA) Local 26 members will also increase, totaling about \$1 million for 2022.</p> <p>Another change to the agreement removed contractual language so that purging of discipline from employee disciplinary files is no longer allowed. They also changed the agreement to clarify that citizen complaints may be anonymous.</p> <p>The city and union have been bargaining over various new changes to police department policy, including the implementation of body worn cameras. All officers who interact with the public are now wearing body cameras.</p>

The union and city also bargained and implemented the “8 Can’t Wait” initiatives, a national campaign meant to bring change to police departments. The eight initiatives — banning chokeholds, requiring de-escalation, requiring a warning before shooting, exhausting all alternatives before shooting, requiring officers to intervene if they see excessive force used by another officer, banning shooting at moving vehicles, creating clear policy on using force, and requiring comprehensive reporting — have all been bargained and implemented, according to city documents.

There’s still more policy bargaining to work through, including the implementation of dash cameras, location tracking technology policy and schedule changes to adjust for shift coverage and mandatory overtime.

For the first time, the city has included community involvement in the bargaining process. Tisha Marie Wosencroft, founder of Tacoma’s LegallyBLACK, and Will Hausa, a member of the Tacoma Pierce County Black Collective, sat in on police union bargaining for a community perspective.

At the Dec. 14 council meeting, Hausa and Wosencroft both said that they were pleased with the new agreement, but that there is still more work to be done.

“I do think that we have made extreme strides to help build that gap of mistrust between the community and this particular contract,” Wosencroft said, later adding: “Please know that if you’re not 100 percent satisfied — neither am I. But I am hopeful in the coming years we will get there.”

City Council members spoke in support of the agreement at the Dec. 14 meeting and thanked city staff, the union and Hausa and Wosencroft for their work.

“We’re just now trying to set the new normal where everybody is confident in policing in our community,” Thoms said. Mayor Victoria Woodards said all parties bargained in good faith and the new agreement will help set up new Tacoma Police Chief Avery Moore for success.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Demand for Covid tests soar across WA
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/omicron-holidays-send-demand-for-covid-tests-soaring-across-washington-state/
GIST	<p>When Donna Barker went through her coronavirus protocol last week for this year’s Christmas gathering, she realized she was missing something — enough rapid COVID-19 tests for all her guests.</p> <p>It didn’t matter as much last year, when she spent the day watching movies and walking through Discovery Park with her husband and college-age daughter, who had been home attending virtual classes for weeks.</p> <p>This year, however, her daughter is flying home from California and Barker is planning to see several other close friends. Everyone has had a booster, she said Monday, but after hearing about the swift spread of the omicron variant, Barker wants each guest to take a rapid test 30 minutes before entering her home.</p> <p>Barker started driving and calling around to pharmacies late last week, ultimately stopping in at five different pharmacies between Renton and Seattle — that doesn’t include the shopping she did online. The phone at one store was answered with, “Yes, we have rapid tests,” Barker said.</p> <p>By the end of the day, she and her husband spent over \$400 and accumulated over 40 rapid tests for her family as well as others.</p> <p>Barker is one of many Seattleites scrambling for rapid antigen tests or testing appointments this holiday season, which has seen demand soar over the past few weeks as gatherings pick up and omicron surges through the community, according to public health and city leaders.</p>

Early testing and vaccinations will play a particularly important role this winter, Mayor Jenny Durkan said in a Monday afternoon news briefing, though she acknowledged [ongoing challenges in securing at-home rapid tests](#) — obstacles that existed before the emergence of the newest variant.

“All of us are still learning about omicron, from the scientists to the researchers, but we know it is here in Seattle. It is spreading quickly and we are projected to reach a new pandemic case high as early as next week,” she said. “But this winter is very different than last winter’s surge because we have vaccinations, vaccine verifications and testing.”

As of last week, about 90% of Seattle residents had received at least one vaccine dose, one of the highest rates in the country, Durkan said. About 65% of kids 5 and older are fully vaccinated, and nearly 50% of those eligible have received booster shots.

Statewide, more than 80% of Washingtonians 12 and up have received at least one vaccine dose. “But we know this virus is not done with us,” Durkan said.

Omicron still on the rise

As of Monday, omicron was likely accounting for about 70% of all positive coronavirus samples tested at the University of Washington’s clinical virology lab — the largest genomic sequencing lab in the state, said Alex Greninger, the assistant director of the University of Washington’s clinical virology lab who’s been sequencing the variant since the beginning of the pandemic.

For the past few weeks, the UW lab has been searching for omicron by tracking samples carrying a particular spike-gene mutation, a notable deletion in the variant’s spike protein. While the alpha variant of the coronavirus also carries the mutation, the deletion has become “almost synonymous with omicron” because of the increasing percentage of these cases in the last few weeks, Greninger said.

Last week, about 40% of coronavirus samples had the mutation. The week before, about 13%.

Monday’s results mean omicron is likely responsible for more than half of new COVID-19 infections — and Greninger is expecting the number to continue shooting up as the week unfolds.

“Starting this week, we’re expecting almost all positives will be omicron,” he said during the Monday briefing.

Infections, meanwhile, have increased 93% in King County in the last seven days, according to the [county’s data dashboard](#). Hospitalizations and deaths are still on the decline, though both generally see at least about a two-week delay after infection trends change.

The recent surge has pushed the county back into a “high transmission” category, which the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines as over 100 cases per 100,000 residents over the last seven days, said Dennis Worsham, interim director for Public Health — Seattle & King County.

“We are expecting to see an increasing number of infections, even among people who have had COVID in the past or breakthrough infections in vaccinated people,” Worsham said Monday.

Testing obstacles

During the news briefing, Worsham echoed Durkan’s call for early testing and vaccinations throughout the holiday season, noting a current “high demand” for COVID-19 tests in King County.

Seattle resident Lucy Moroukian, 25, said she started looking for a rapid test when she woke up with a scratchy throat last week and began hearing news of the omicron variant.

Each place told her they were sold out until the following week.

“Every time I go to a store, I get more and more discouraged that it’s not worth searching harder because they’re not anywhere anyway,” Moroukian, who lives on Capitol Hill, said Monday.

She eventually tracked down a rapid test and tested negative for the coronavirus, but when her condition worsened over the weekend, she scheduled an appointment for a PCR test.

Now, she’s waiting on results — but because of testing demand, she’s worried an answer won’t come before her scheduled Christmas Eve flight home to Minnesota. If that’s the case, Moroukian plans to spend Christmas on her own in Seattle.

“I have grandparents who are in their late 80s and a brother who’s under 10,” she said. “It just feels like too big of a risk.”

While Durkan and Worsham said Monday they’re doing their best to make sure tests and vaccinations are accessible this winter, Moroukian said her experience had been far from easy.

In order to find a \$25 rapid test, Moroukian said she had to take time off from her job at a greenhouse and plant nursery — where she has lots of face-to-face interactions with customers — which pays \$16.69 an hour and offers no paid sick leave.

“It’s insane to me that our government is not making it more accessible to test before we go in public or go to work,” she said.

A Bartell’s spokesperson said in a Monday statement that the Pacific Northwest drugstore chain has seen “an increasingly high demand” for coronavirus rapid testing.

“While rapid at-home testing kits are often the most convenient option, demand is simply outpacing supply from manufacturers in many parts of the country,” the statement said. “As we receive shipments, we are quickly making rapid at-home testing kits available to our customers.”

Spokespeople for Walgreens and CVS also reported recent increases in demand for at-home tests.

Monica Prinzing, spokesperson for CVS’ western region, said Monday that when one of its stores runs out of tests, there’s a “process in place to rapidly replenish supply,” but didn’t elaborate on the process.

Bartell’s encouraged those in the Seattle area unable to find at-home testing kits to visit their drive-thru testing sites instead.

Securing appointments

In the Puget Sound region, UW Medicine runs 11 testing sites, with “high-volume” locations in [Lake Sammamish State Park](#), which opened last week, and in [Shoreline](#), which opened last month. All sites are open every day during the holidays, except Christmas and New Year’s Day, and three of the sites are open on Sundays.

To make an appointment at one of the UW testing sites, visit uwmedicine.org/coronavirus/testing. Greninger encouraged people to make appointments online first, but said many of the sites also take walk-ups.

Appointments are also available in Auburn, Bellevue, Enumclaw, Federal Way, Kent, Renton, SeaTac and Tukwila; for information, go to kingcounty.gov.

“Testing is very important for your health, as well as for us to have the data that gets reported to [Public Health — Seattle & King County] so our policymakers can inform their responses as we go along in this pandemic,” Greninger said.

HEADLINE	12/20 CBP: 10% increase border crossers in Nov.
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/cbp/cbp-reports-10-percent-increase-in-border-crossers-for-november/
GIST	<p>U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) today released operational statistics for November 2021, which can be viewed online here.</p> <p>“CBP’s November Monthly Operational Update reflects an incredible amount of work on behalf of the American people to keep dangerous drugs and products out of our communities, to facilitate travel and billions of dollars in trade, and to maintain security along our borders,” said CBP Commissioner Chris Magnus. “It’s an honor to lead a workforce whose mission is so vital to our economic health and national security. CBP’s vigilance is key to disrupting smugglers and transnational criminal organizations as they exploit vulnerable populations and attempt to traffic illegal and dangerous products.”</p> <p>CBP Southwest Border Enforcement Numbers for November 2021</p> <p>The large number of expulsions during the pandemic has contributed to a higher than usual number of migrants making multiple border crossing attempts, which means that total encounters somewhat overstate the number of unique individuals arriving at the border.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The number of unique individuals encountered in November 2021 was 127,653, a 10% increase in the number of unique individuals encountered the prior month. • In total, there were 173,620 encounters along the Southwest border, a 5% increase compared to October. Of those, 25% involved individuals who had at least one prior encounter in the previous 12 months, compared to an average one year re-encounter rate of 13% for FY2014-2019. • Two-thirds (66%) of encounters were single adults, with 114,419 encounters in November, a 5% increase compared to October. • 87,341 encounters, more than 50% of the total, were processed for expulsion under Title 42 in November. 86,279 encounters were processed under Title 8. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ 75,955 encounters involving single adults (66% of all single adult encounters) were processed for expulsion under Title 42, with 38,464 processed under Title 8. ◦ 11,155 encounters involving family unit individuals (25% of all family unit individuals) were processed for expulsion under Title 42, with 33,784 processed under Title 8. <p>Unaccompanied Children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encounters of unaccompanied children increased 9%, with 13,959 encounters in November compared with 12,783 in October. In November, the average number of unaccompanied children in CBP custody was 962 per day, compared with an average of 595 per day in October. <p>Family Unit individuals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encounters of family unit individuals increased by 5% from 42,795 in October to 44,939 in November—which was approximately half the peak of 86,631 in August 2021.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 Omicron, staff shortages disrupt schools
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2021-12-20/school-closures-mount-as-omicron-spreads-staff-shortages-swell
GIST	<p>The number of school disruptions due to COVID-19, including closing early for the holiday break or announcing temporary returns to virtual learning next week, is on the rise – nearing the total number of disruptions recorded in late August, when schools were struggling to reopen against the backdrop of the delta variant.</p> <p>The increased interruptions, as reported by Burbio, which has been tracking school responses to the coronavirus, is due to both increasing COVID-19 cases as a result of the introduction of the new omicron variant as well as to logistical challenges stemming from educator and staff shortages.</p> <p>“Educators, administrators and support staff must be able to deliver in-person instruction and other activities in conditions that prioritize their own health, as well as the wellbeing of the school community,” Monica Goldson, CEO of Prince George’s County Public Schools, wrote in announcing a</p>

return to virtual learning this week. “The increased positivity rates have significantly challenged the ability to do so, causing anxiety among many school communities and disruption to the school day.” Schools in the Maryland school district, which serves 136,000 students, will be remote until Jan. 14.

Burbio found 646 instances of school disruptions – nearly double the number from the previous week – and is already tracking more than 400 instances of schools returning to virtual beginning the week of Jan. 2.

Evidence shows schools remain one of the safest spaces for children in terms of the risk of transmission, but they’re also now one of the most vulnerable spaces since vaccination rates among children remain low. As it stands, 18% of kids ages 5 to 11 have at least one shot, as do 61% of children aged 12 to 17, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, but the vaccination rate for children has dramatically [slowed](#).

More than 164,000 coronavirus cases in children were reported the week beginning Dec. 6 – a jump of nearly 24% over the previous week, according to a [report](#) from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children’s Hospital Association. The groups called this number “extremely high.”

The developments come as the Biden administration is ramping up its focus on keeping children in school full time, including by [endorsing test-to-stay policies](#) and urging school districts to use federal coronavirus aid to [fend off teacher and staff shortages](#).

Last week, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Rochelle Walensky outlined new data on “test-to-stay” policies, in which students who have been exposed to the virus but show no symptoms can remain in school as long as they test every day or no less frequently than twice a week.

The strategy would replace current CDC guidance, which recommends children who have been exposed quarantine for up to 10 days – a policy that’s shuttered whole classrooms for weeks at a time and made it difficult for educators to help students regain the academic, social and emotional losses incurred since the onset of the pandemic.

Also last week, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona directed school districts to “act with urgency” to use federal aid to blunt the impact of workforce shortages that are causing disruptions to every facet of the country’s public education system – from classrooms to transportation to school meals to maintenance – and is, in some extreme cases, forcing districts to temporarily return to remote learning.

Roughly 1 in 4 district leaders and principals are reporting severe staffing shortages, according to a recent survey by the Education Week Research Center. And according to a recent survey by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, 68% of principals surveyed are concerned about teacher shortages and report it has been more difficult to hire qualified teachers since the onset of the pandemic.

To be sure, the vast majority of schools are still open full time for in-person learning. The Education Department recently released new data showing that [99% of students are learning in-person](#), compared to 74% of fourth-graders and 67% of eighth-graders who were enrolled full time and in person or in a hybrid model at the end [of the last school year](#).

Notably, the new data shows that 99% of fourth- and eighth-grade students are attending school full time and in person in schools where 25% or less of the students enrolled are races other than white, as well as for those in schools where 76% or more of the students enrolled are races other than white – a major improvement from last school year, when the majority of schools still operating remotely or on a hybrid schedule served mostly students of color and students from low-income families.

Yet the good news is undercut by research reinforcing the significant learning loss that occurred over the last two school years, especially for Black and Hispanic students, for students with disabilities and those learning English and for students from low-income families.

	<p>According to a new analysis from McKinsey, students remain behind in both math and reading, and the gains made since the spring are uneven, with some students making up lost ground and others stalling out, further exacerbating decades-old achievement gaps. Students in majority-Black schools remain five months behind where they typically are in both math and reading, for example, while students in majority-white schools are now just two months behind where they typically are – meaning students in majority-Black schools are now 12 months behind their peers in majority-white schools, having started the pandemic nine months behind.</p> <p>The findings are mirrored in new research from NWEA, an assessment company, that compares the test scores of 6 million public school students in grades three to eight from fall 2021 to students in the same grade in fall of 2019 – just prior to the onset of the pandemic. It found significant levels of unfinished learning, particularly in math, with historically marginalized students and students in high-poverty schools disproportionately impacted, especially in the elementary grades.</p> <p>In addition, the NWEA research found that higher achievers made gains that were more consistent with projected growth, whereas lower-achieving students were more likely to fall short of growth projections – a concerning finding that also appeared in the most recent results from the National Assessment of Education Progress.</p> <p>Closing those gaps will remain difficult if the number of school districts pivoting back to virtual options continues to rise – as it’s expected to, despite recommendations from public health experts who continue to underscore that closing schools should be a last resort.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 Seattle crews clear homeless encampment
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/homeless/green-lake-camp-removed-days-before-christmas-after-months-of-political-pressure/
GIST	<p>Mere days before Christmas and the arrival of a new mayor in City Hall, Seattle cleanup crews and parking enforcement removed an encampment Monday morning at Green Lake Park that the surrounding neighborhood has been vocal about for much of the year.</p> <p>Mayor Jenny Durkan, in her last months in office, has been steadily removing large Seattle encampments. A statement from her office cast Monday’s removal as part of a new pandemic-era strategy where everyone in the encampment is offered shelter or housing, and outreach staff work for months to make sure as many as possible move there safely before getting rid of the encampment.</p> <p>But advocates of that new method were hesitant to agree. About half of the more than 30 people in the camp received referrals to tiny houses or shelter, and 13 simply moved their tents and belongings — many of them, according to a camper, up the hill to Woodland Park where a large encampment still sprawls. It’s unclear when that encampment will be removed.</p> <p>After two removals of high-profile encampments earlier this month that drew praise for moving a large portion of residents into shelters, tiny homes or other housing, Green Lake’s clearing appeared closer to those before the pandemic, when police would give homeless campers a few days’ notice, and most campers would simply move to the next park.</p> <p>People who live near the park or use it have complained for months as the encampment grew.</p> <p>Though Seattle police statistics for the surrounding area show crime is slightly lower this year than previous, neighbors like Kyle Oswald, who lives within half a mile, said it certainly feels like crime rose when the encampment grew. He’s had propane tanks and outdoor seat cushions stolen from his backyard in the last year.</p>

Oswald wishes the campers hadn't been forced to leave during Christmas week, but blames city leaders for refusing to deal with this issue for so long.

"My contention is with the City Council and the mayor kicking this can down the road for years and years and years," Oswald said.

Mayor-elect Bruce Harrell hosted a news conference down the street from the encampment in September before winning the election on a platform partly focused on keeping parks clear of encampments.

Harrell, who takes office next month, said in a statement that it is inhumane for people to live in parks without sanitation, running water and access to the services needed to restore lives and stability, and this removal was a step in that direction.

"We cannot allow this crisis to continue to worsen," Harrell's statement said. "My priority from day one will be putting into action the resources we have to help restore lives, while at the same time restoring parks, public places and public trust in Seattle."

Councilmember Dan Strauss was heavily involved with the Ballard Commons removal earlier this month, where the vast majority of people living in tents not only got referred to shelter but the city and its partners made sure they actually moved in. Strauss said he didn't know enough about the city's removal tactics to say if Green Lake had the same process.

Twice, the date to clear Ballard Commons was pushed back, Strauss said, because there were remaining campers who wanted to go inside but appropriate shelter hadn't yet opened.

"The success of that removal was we weren't rushing to close the park," Strauss said.

Lisa Dugaard, one of the leading evangelists for the new approach and the executive director of the Public Defender Association, also wasn't involved in this removal and declined to comment on whether it was the kind of removal she coordinated at City Hall Park and at Eighth Avenue South and King Street earlier this year, among others.

Dugaard did say that one of the extraordinary things about Ballard Commons and Bitter Lake was how many hotels and tiny house villages were opening up at the time outreach workers were offering alternatives to the outdoors — and more than the long timelines, those new beds were the reason for that success.

"So without the appropriate range of options, there's no way to accomplish the kind of resolution of an encampment that from time to time [our partnership] has been able to bring to bear," Dugaard said.

Stacia Murphy, who's lived at the Green Lake camp four months, said she woke up to the city crews telling people to leave this morning. She had accepted a referral to move into a tiny house on Friday but staff couldn't find her that day when they came to the camp. She missed her chance and someone else got the spot, she said.

Murphy blames herself for that, and said that living conditions at the Green Lake encampment worsened in the last few months as more people moved in and stopped picking up their trash. But she still felt pained by the push.

"They literally had to do this before Christmas," Murphy said. "That's what hurts me the most."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/21 New year 'too late' for extra UK covid rules?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/21/new-year-too-late-for-extra-covid-rules-in-england-scientists-say

GIST

Scientists have reacted with dismay to Boris Johnson's decision not to impose fresh restrictions to curb the spread of Omicron, emphasizing that waiting until the new year would "almost certainly be too late to have a material impact on the epidemic".

Because the rate of growth in infection rates may already have plateaued or fallen by then, it may also be too late to know what impact those restrictions would have had if they had been introduced earlier. "We are damned if we do and damned if we don't," said Paul Hunter, a professor of medicine at the University of East Anglia.

The prime minister announced after a cabinet meeting that he would not be introducing any further Covid restrictions for now, adding: "The situation is extremely difficult and the arguments either way are very, very finely balanced."

Data on the hospitalisation rate for those infected with the Omicron variant would be kept under "constant review", he said, with government sources hinting that further restrictions were likely after Christmas, possibly starting a week tomorrow.

Yet, with Omicron infections currently doubling within 48 hours in most regions of the UK, the country may already have reached a ceiling where the rate of growth begins to fall and case numbers plateau.

Hunter believes that point could come within days, with or without interventions. "If we implement control measures now, they are unlikely to be sufficient to reverse the growth, only slow it," he said. "But there may still be benefits in slowing the peak, in terms of flattening the curve."

One solution that appears to be on the table is a return to the "step 2" measures introduced as part of the roadmap out of lockdown earlier this year – chiefly, people only being allowed to socialise indoors with members of their household or a support bubble, and outdoor socialising being limited to groups of six people or two households, including at pubs and restaurants.

Prof Christina Pagel, the director of UCL's clinical operational research unit, said: "Waiting for definitive evidence that it could cause the NHS to be overwhelmed will be too late to avert the crisis. Instead, the government should follow Sage [the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies] advice and return to step 2 of the roadmap immediately to prevent thousands of infections over the coming days and then monitor the situation hour by hour so that measures can be lifted as quickly as possible, hopefully even in time to enable limited household mixing over Christmas weekend."

Other scientists took issue with the prime minister's claim that the scientific arguments for further restrictions were "finely balanced". Trish Greenhalgh, a professor of primary care health services at the University of Oxford, said: "Mr Johnson claims that getting booster vaccinations 'could not be more urgent' but refuses to apply the same standards of urgency to the full range of preventive measures needed. There are strong scientific arguments for people to immediately cease the activities that are known to cause transmission of this exceptionally contagious variant."

Large indoor gatherings of unmasked people should be cancelled, and well-fitting, high-filtration masks should be worn at all times indoors, especially in crowded settings, such as on public transport, she said.

Yet other scientists highlighted the negative impact on people's mental wellbeing of continued uncertainty around coronavirus restrictions. Dr Charley Baker, an associate professor of mental health at the University of Nottingham, said: "Clear statements are required that set out exactly what paths are under consideration and which parameters need to be met for each path. Delay, prevarication and constant rumour leaves us all very much struggling as we try to prepare for the onslaught of the difficult days ahead."

[Return to Top](#)**HEADLINE****12/20 Philippine typhoon death toll rises**

SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/21/philippines-typhoon-rai-death-toll-reaches-375-as-desperate-survivors-plead-for-supplies
GIST	<p>The death toll from the strongest typhoon to hit the Philippines this year has surged to 375 , as desperate survivors pleaded for urgent supplies of drinking water and food.</p> <p>The Philippine Red Cross reported “complete carnage” in coastal areas after Super Typhoon Rai left homes, hospitals and schools “ripped to shreds”.</p> <p>The storm tore off roofs, uprooted trees, toppled concrete power poles, smashed wooden houses to pieces, wiped out crops and flooded villages - sparking comparisons to the damage caused by Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.</p> <p>“Our situation is so desperate,” said Ferry Asuncion, a street vendor in the hard-hit seaside city of Surigao, which was devastated by the storm.</p> <p>Residents urgently needed drinking water and food, he said.</p> <p>At least 375 people were killed and 56 are missing in the latest disaster to hit the archipelago, with 500 more injured, the national police said.</p> <p>More than 380,000 people fled their homes and beachfront resorts as Rai slammed into the country on Thursday.</p> <p>One of the hardest-hit islands was Bohol - known for its beaches, “Chocolate Hills” and tiny tarsier primates - where at least 94 people have died, provincial Governor Arthur Yap said on Facebook.</p> <p>Many wooden houses in Bohol’s coastal town of Ubay were flattened and small fishing boats destroyed on the island, where a state of calamity has been declared.</p> <p>A senior official at the national disaster agency said he had not expected as many deaths.</p> <p>“I was proven wrong as it appears now coming from the reports,” said Casiano Monilla, deputy administrator for operations.</p> <p>Rai hit the Philippines late in the typhoon season: most cyclones develop between July and October.</p> <p>Scientists have long warned that typhoons are becoming more powerful and strengthening more rapidly as the world becomes warmer because of human-driven climate change.</p> <p>The Philippines, which is ranked among the most vulnerable nations to the impacts of climate change, is hit by an average of 20 storms every year, which typically wipe out harvests, homes and infrastructure in already impoverished areas.</p> <p>In 2013, Typhoon Haiyan was the strongest storm ever to have made landfall, leaving over 7,300 people dead or missing. The death toll from Rai is not expected to get anywhere close to that number.</p> <p>The Philippines has an established disaster management system that provides early warnings of approaching storms and moves vulnerable communities into evacuation centres.</p> <p>But the storm has dealt a savage blow to the tourism sector, which was already struggling after Covid-19 restrictions decimated visitor numbers.</p> <p>“SOS” has been painted on a road in the tourist town of General Luna on Siargao Island, where surfers and holidaymakers had flocked ahead of Christmas, as people struggled to find water and food.</p>

“There’s no water any more, there’s a water shortage, on day one there was already looting in our neighbourhood,” Siargao resort owner Marja O’Donnell told CNN Philippines.

There has also been widespread destruction on Dinagat and Mindanao islands, which along with Siargao bore the brunt of the storm when it hit, packing wind speeds of 195 kilometres (120 miles) an hour.

Police reported 167 deaths in the Caraga region, which includes Dinagat, Siargao and the north-eastern part of Mindanao.

At least 14 people died on the Dinagat Islands, provincial information officer Jeffrey Crisostomo told broadcaster ABS-CBN, saying the area had been “levelled to the ground”.

With electricity knocked out in many areas, there was no signal or internet, hampering efforts to assess the storm’s damage.

Thousands of military, police, coast guard and fire personnel were deployed along with food, water and medical supplies, while heavy machinery - including backhoes and front-end loaders - were sent to clear roads.

President Rodrigo Duterte vowed to “look for another” two billion pesos (\$40m) in aid, which would double his previous pledge.

But some expressed frustration at the government’s response.

“No one showed up, I don’t know where the politicians and (election) candidates are,” said a visibly angry Levi Lisondra, a resident in Surigao, on the northern tip of Mindanao.

“We paid big taxes when we were working and now they can’t help us.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Mixed Covid response down to geography
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-mixed-response-to-the-omicron-variant-comes-down-to-geography-11640040779?mod=hp_lead_pos2
GIST	<p>In Grand Prairie, Texas, organizers are forging ahead with plans for Lunar New Year festivities, while an annual New Year’s Eve celebration in downtown Los Angeles was canceled Monday for in-person attendees. Meantime, New York City officials are re-evaluating whether spectators will be able to crowd into Times Square to watch the New Year’s Eve ball drop.</p> <p>How Americans are confronting the uncertainties around the worrisome Omicron strain is coming down to where they live.</p> <p>Across the Northeast and Midwest, including places with rising cases, anxious calls for caution have prompted shutdowns to some in-person classes, sporting events and other festivities. Yet the South, and rural areas, are largely plowing ahead, making fewer changes to holiday plans.</p> <p>The varying approaches to the looming Covid-19 threat reflect broader variations in how Americans have weighed the risks of living with the virus.</p> <p>The difference between the preholiday week this year and last year, elected officials and families say, is they are considering not just case counts and Covid-19 fatigue but also rates of vaccinations, which had only just started last December.</p> <p>“I got my vaccination, and I plan on getting the booster,” said Matthew Loh, chief executive of Asia Times Square, an international market in Grand Prairie. “I think I am just going ahead and learning to live with Covid as if it was another flu.”</p>

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the country's top infectious-disease expert, said Sunday on ABC News that [he doesn't anticipate](#) the U.S. moving toward broad shutdowns, even as [some European countries have imposed new restrictions](#). He also said vaccinated Americans who have received [booster shots](#) can feel comfortable traveling this month to see family.

The U.S. is now averaging more than 125,000 new Covid-19 cases a day, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The seven-day average for Covid-19 hospital admissions fell 4.8% in the week ended Dec. 18 to 7,501 a day, but hospitalizations are up 49% from a recent low in early November, CDC data show. Deaths increased to a seven-day average of 1,182 a day as of Dec. 17, up 3.6% versus the previous week.

On Monday, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu announced new vaccine requirements, citing rising case counts. Beginning Jan. 15, patrons at certain establishments, including indoor dining, fitness and entertainment venues, will be required to show proof of vaccination to enter.

In nearby Everett, Mass., the Encore Boston Harbor casino was lively on Sunday afternoon, with patrons—some masked and some not—playing slots and table games and taking selfies in the ornate lobby.

Tyler Michaud, who visited the casino on a weekend getaway from his home in Connecticut, said he is taking the virus seriously but feels the country now has more tools to deal with the pandemic.

"I feel safer this time around. I'm fully vaccinated and got my booster," said Mr. Michaud, a 22-year-old special-education teacher. "I definitely feel more confident."

Mary Beth King, a manager at Long Creek General Store in rural Westminster, S.C., said she and her customers are going about their business as usual. About 45% of those eligible are fully vaccinated in Oconee County, where Westminster is located, compared with about 65% in South Carolina's Charleston County, according to CDC data.

"Honestly, you can spend the day here and you would not even know it's a pandemic," said Ms. King, who is 54 years old.

Ms. King doesn't wear a mask and doesn't plan to get the vaccine, and she says many people she knows in her small community feel the same way. She said they have long been skeptical of news around Covid-19 and remain so now.

"It's mostly people that are traveling through who may have on masks and appear to be concerned about the whole Covid thing," she said.

Daily airport volumes have risen despite the Covid-19 surge, topping two million daily screenings from Thursday through Sunday, according to the Transportation Security Administration. That is the first four-day streak above that threshold since November.

In Miami Beach, Fla., tourists continued to crowd restaurants, bars and nightclubs alongside residents, many of them without masks. The city, which has limited ability to impose Covid-19 restrictions because of a state law enacted earlier this year, hasn't canceled any events, said Mayor Dan Gelber.

But some event organizers have. The Capital One Beach Bash scheduled for Dec. 30 in Miami Beach, at which singer Harry Styles was scheduled to perform, was canceled "due to increasing logistical and production challenges related to the pandemic," according to a statement released by organizers.

The mayor said he is worried about a potential new surge of coronavirus cases and lamented that more people aren't fully vaccinated and boosted to stem the spread. "This feels like one of the great unforced errors in the history of mankind," he said.

Cassandra Basler said she was disinvented from Christmas with relatives in Michigan after she asked that they take rapid tests before getting together. Ms. Basler said members of her family are vaccinated but don't share her views on wearing masks and using rapid tests.

"They rescinded the invitation in a very 'Midwest nice' sort of way," said Ms. Basler, a 31-year-old news editor at a public radio station in Connecticut. "It was like, 'Yeah, if you're so worried about the virus, you better not come.'"

Ms. Basler's dilemma resonated online where a tweet saying she was "uninvited" for Christmas had gotten more than 90,000 likes by Monday.

"I'm frustrated because at this point we have had so much information come out about ways to supplement the vaccines as these variants emerge," said Ms. Basler, who will spend Christmas with relatives in Boston who share her views. "I'm hurt, and I'm confused."

[In New York City](#), where cases have climbed in the past week, Mayor Bill de Blasio said Monday his administration would decide before Christmas whether to hold the city's massive New Year's Eve celebration in Times Square.

Mr. de Blasio said other large events in the city would proceed, including a concert by local crooner Billy Joel scheduled for Monday evening at Madison Square Garden. The departing Democratic mayor said he did "not see a scenario for any kind of shutdown because we are so vaccinated as a city."

But rising cases in the city prompted some fans to cancel their plans. City officials on Monday reported 7,245 new infections—double the 28-day average.

Howard Klein, a 49-year-old accountant from New Jersey, said he previously would attend about a half-dozen shows each year at the Garden and has seen Mr. Joel play 106 times. He had planned a longer trip to Manhattan, but scrapped it because he feared events would be canceled.

Anna Hanrahan got tickets to the show as a Christmas present in 2019. "We can't justify attending a concert when Christmas is exactly when we might become contagious to others if we contract Covid," she said. "I am disgusted the show is not canceled or postponed."

A spokeswoman for Madison Square Garden Entertainment said the concert was "moving forward as scheduled, and we are continuing to adhere to all government mandates related to our health and safety protocols."

Lauren Lipscomb's family took in a Sunday holiday concert in Baltimore that featured tap-dancing Santas. The family was willing to attend the crowded Baltimore Symphony Orchestra show because all attendees had to present vaccination cards and wear masks, she said in the concert hall's lobby alongside her husband, Adam Shuster, and their sons, Cole, 7, and Donovan, 12.

But worries about Omicron have led them to cancel planned gatherings with friends over winter break.

"We really expected as a family that things would be back to normal by now," said Ms. Lipscomb, a 46-year-old prosecutor. "Here we are, confronted with yet another variant, and we don't really know what's about to happen."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Stocks, oil fall on new Covid curbs
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/global-stock-markets-dow-update-12-20-2021-11639989846?mod=hp_lead_pos3

Major U.S. stock indexes declined for the third consecutive trading session on Monday, as the fast-spreading [Omicron variant of Covid-19](#) spurred fears that new lockdowns could derail the sputtering global economic recovery.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell more than 400 points, while oil prices slid in a broad retreat from risky assets. Covid-19 cases are climbing in New York City and other parts of the U.S., while more countries have adopted travel bans or restricted business activities to combat the virus.

Further damaging sentiment, Sen. Joe Manchin (D., W.Va.) said over the weekend that he would oppose his party's roughly \$2 trillion education, healthcare and climate package. The senator's stance will likely [doom the centerpiece of President Biden's economic agenda](#) as currently written—a failure that could weigh on consumer spending, which has been a key source of strength in the U.S. economy this year.

Also behind the market's tumble was a loss of support from the Federal Reserve. The Fed moved Wednesday to wind down its pandemic-era stimulus policies more quickly and raise interest rates next year in a bid to combat inflation, which pulled stocks down to end last week. Low rates had helped U.S. stocks to record highs this year before Omicron's emergence.

"We're really seeing Omicron spread like wildfire, and it's weighing on sentiment," said Esty Dwek, chief investment officer at FlowBank. "You're seeing lockdowns instigated in Europe. You're seeing more and more restrictions and the number of cases is going up so much that even if it's less severe it could lead to more hospitalizations."

The Dow fell 433.28 points on Monday, or 1.2%, to close at 34932.16, adding to its losses after a 1.5% [drop on Friday](#). The S&P 500 slid 52.62 points, or 1.1%, to 4568.02. The technology-focused Nasdaq Composite slumped 188.74 points, or 1.2%, to 14980.94.

Israel said Monday that it would ban its citizens from traveling to the U.S. or Canada. Over the weekend, the Netherlands reimposed a lockdown, with all nonessential shops, bars and restaurants closed until mid-January. Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin also announced new restrictions. President Biden plans to deliver an update Tuesday on the fight against Covid-19 in the U.S.

Meanwhile, Goldman Sachs economists lowered their forecasts for U.S. economic growth in 2022 after Mr. Manchin's comments regarding the president's social-spending bill. Goldman wrote in a Sunday note that the bill's apparent demise "has negative implications for near-term consumption." They cited the likely end of the expanded child tax credit, which has helped prop up consumer spending during the pandemic but is set to expire at the end of December.

Global oil demand remains about two million barrels a day short of its pre-pandemic level of almost 101 million barrels a day, according to the International Energy Agency. The new surge in Covid-19 cases is expected to slow the revival in demand by reducing air travel and hitting consumption of jet fuel.

Front-month Brent crude futures, the benchmark in global oil markets, declined 2.7% to settle at \$71.52 a barrel. The selloff battered shares of oil drillers, with [Occidental Petroleum](#) and [Diamondback Energy](#) both shedding more than 3%.

The imminent end of 2021 may be contributing to the stock selloff. Portfolio managers whose performance is assessed on a year-over-year basis are likely closing out positions and locking in gains after a strong year in markets. Despite its recent slide, the S&P 500 is up more than 20% this year.

Some analysts said a selloff had been inevitable after a frenetic rally fueled by speculation. Many of this year's market gains have been concentrated in a handful of big tech stocks such as Tesla and [Microsoft](#), which have an outsize impact on the S&P 500.

“There’s been a lot more weakness under the surface than what’s suggested by the major indexes,” said Liz Ann Sonders, chief investment strategist at Charles Schwab.

Nine of the S&P 500’s 11 sectors ended Monday in negative territory. Financials, materials companies, industrials and consumer-discretionary stocks were the worst-performing sectors.

Investors continue to evaluate the [danger posed by the Omicron variant](#). There were wide moves in stocks that investors often use to bet on surges in Covid cases or post-pandemic recovery. [Moderna](#) shares initially jumped around 9% after the vaccine maker [released upbeat data of the effectiveness of its Covid-19 vaccine](#) against Omicron, but they later sold off and lost \$18.42, or 6.2%, to close at \$276.38.

Shares of cruise operator [Carnival](#)—a popular reopening trade—fell more than 3% at the open, then reversed course and climbed 62 cents, or 3.4%, to close at \$18.90.

[Oracle](#) fell \$4.98, or 5.2%, to \$91.64 a share after the software giant [agreed to buy electronic-medical-records](#) company [Cerner](#) Corp. for more than \$28 billion. Cerner advanced 72 cents a share, or 0.8%, to \$90.49.

In bond markets, the yield on the benchmark 10-year Treasury note ticked up to 1.418% from 1.401% Friday. Bond yields move in the opposite direction from prices.

Overseas, the pan-continental Stoxx Europe 600 fell 1.4%. Shares of [BNP Paribas](#) rose 0.4%, outperforming the broader banking sector, after it agreed to sell Bank of the West to [Bank of Montreal](#) for \$16.3 billion in one of the [largest recent bank deals](#).

Major Asian markets retreated. South Korea’s Kospi contracted 1.8% and Japan’s Nikkei 225 shed 2.1%. Hong Kong’s flagship Hang Seng Index fell 1.9% to its lowest closing level since March 2020, according to FactSet.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Expected: rise of omicron variant in Seattle
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3288669/rise-of-omicron-variant-seattle-testing/
GIST	<p>In the coming days, nearly all new positive COVID cases in the Seattle area are expected to be the omicron variant.</p> <p>Within the next week, UW Medicine’s Dr. Alex Greninger says King County and the surrounding region could see record high COVID case counts.</p> <p>“Our most recent data puts it at 70% of all positive cases for samples collected last Thursday,” Greninger said of the variant. “Starting this week, we’re expecting almost all positives will be omicron, as well as a substantial increase in the number of overall cases.”</p> <p>Thankfully, Seattle has some big advantages working in its favor, as Mayor Jenny Durkan pointed out on Monday, including a high vaccination rate and enough capacity for testing.</p> <p>“[Omicron] is here in Seattle, it is spreading quickly, and we are projected to reach a new pandemic case high as early as next week,” she said.</p> <p>“Many major cities are struggling to keep up with the demand that omicron has brought, but we still have the capacity to test people in the city,” Durkan added.</p> <p>As of Friday, Seattle’s vaccination rate is at 90%, with 45% of eligible residents boosted.</p> <p>Durkan asked people not to panic, and to get tested at the first sign of symptoms or of a known exposure. She and Greninger urged everyone who is eligible to get boosted if they haven’t already.</p>

	<p>People are also being asked to rethink their holiday gatherings if they include large groups, and to keep well-fitting masks on when indoors.</p> <p>“Continuing to wear the mask indoors, limiting the number of people at your celebrations,” Durkan advised for the upcoming holidays. “It’s not worth getting together if one of you gets sick.”</p> <p>If you’re not sure when to visit a testing site, Dr. Greninger suggests going if you’ve been around anyone that has been confirmed to have COVID, or if you start feeling any cold-like symptoms.</p> <p>“Certainly fever, cough, and this is supposed to be a little more bronchitis-y picture, for omicron, so far is what I’ve heard,” he said.</p> <p>The UW Medicine testing sites across King County have enough tests for everyone who needs one, but the Lake Sammamish and Shoreline sites should especially have room.</p> <p>Find a UW Medicine COVID-19 testing site near you here, and more information about COVID-19 testing in Seattle here. Visit this page for more information about COVID vaccine sites in the city.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/20 EPA tightest-ever auto pollution rules
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/climate/tailpipe-rules-climate-biden.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency on Monday announced strengthened limits on pollution from automobile tailpipes in a bid to reduce a major source of the carbon dioxide emissions that are heating the planet.</p> <p>The more stringent rule — the most significant climate action taken to date by the Biden administration and highest level ever set for fuel economy — would require passenger vehicles to travel an average of 55 miles per gallon of gasoline by 2026, from just under 38 miles per gallon today.</p> <p>That would prevent the release of 3.1 billion tons of climate-warming carbon dioxide through 2050, according to the E.P.A. It would save about 360 billion gallons of gasoline from being burned, leading to a 15 percent annual reduction in the nation’s gasoline consumption by 2050. And motorists would save about \$1,080 in fuel costs over the lifetime of more efficient vehicles, the agency estimated.</p> <p>The Biden administration is expected to lean heavily on executive action and regulations like the new tailpipe rule after the centerpiece of the president’s climate agenda, far-reaching legislation that would have transformed the energy and transportation sectors, was essentially scuttled on Sunday by Senator Joe Manchin III, the West Virginia Democrat who holds the swing vote in an evenly split Senate.</p> <p>The tailpipe rule, which will take effect 60 days after it is published in the Federal Register and apply to model years 2023 to 2026, is a return of sorts to regulations enacted by the Obama administration in 2012, which required that passenger vehicles sold by automakers achieve an average of roughly 51 miles per gallon by 2025. President Donald J. Trump weakened the standard in 2020 to about 44 miles per gallon by 2026.</p> <p>“We followed the science, we listened to stakeholders, and we are setting robust and rigorous standards that will aggressively reduce the pollution that is harming people and our planet — and save families money at the same time,” Michael S. Regan, the administrator of the E.P.A., said in a statement.</p> <p>Transportation is the largest single source of greenhouse gases generated by the United States, representing 29 percent of the nation’s total emissions.</p> <p>A recent report by the International Energy Agency found that nations would have to end the sale of new gasoline-powered cars by 2035 to keep average global temperatures from increasing 1.5 Celsius, compared</p>

[with levels during the Industrial Revolution.](#) That's the threshold beyond which scientists say the Earth faces irreversible damage. The planet has already warmed an average of about 1.1 degrees Celsius since the late 1800s.

Climate experts said the new tailpipe rule is a first step in Mr. Biden's push to rapidly shift American drivers from cars and trucks powered by the internal combustion engines of the last century to zero-emission electric vehicles.

The new Biden rule "is basically just recapturing the emissions cuts that we lost during the Trump rollback," said Jeff Alson, a former E.P.A. senior engineer and policy adviser who worked on the Obama auto emissions standards. "That's good, but it's not going to get us anywhere near the level we've got to get to reduce vehicle emissions enough to protect the planet."

About \$26 billion in tax incentives to speed up the adoption of electric vehicles has been stuck in limbo on Capitol Hill, part of a larger \$2.2 trillion bill, known as the Build Back Better Act that faces opposition from Mr. Manchin. Among the bill's provisions are a tax credit of \$7,500 for purchasers of electric vehicles, plus an additional incentive of \$4,500 if the vehicles are assembled by union workers.

Mr. Biden has set a goal for electric vehicles to make up 50 percent of all new car sales by 2030 in order to slash planet-heating emissions and slow climate change. But electric cars are on track to total just 4 percent of American sales in 2021, a hint of the scale of the challenge Mr. Biden faces.

A significant step was taken last month, when Congress passed a \$1 trillion infrastructure bill that included \$7.5 billion to build about 500,000 electric charging stations nationwide, plus another \$7.5 billion to help bolster supply chains needed to produce electric vehicles. This month, Mr. Biden signed an executive order requiring the federal government to purchase only zero-emission cars and trucks by 2035.

But more is needed to reach Mr. Biden's goal, climate advocates say.

"The short-term rule that the president is announcing now isn't up to the challenge that he himself named, that global warming is an existential threat," said Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Transport Campaign at the Center for Biological Diversity. "What we really need is an aggressive rule as soon as possible to phase out the gasoline-powered vehicles that are guzzling and polluting and replace them with EVs that have no tailpipe."

So E.P.A. officials are working on a future regulation for vehicles built in model year 2027 and beyond that would compel automakers to ramp up sales of electric vehicles. They say they hope to publish a draft in 2022 and to complete it before the end of Mr. Biden's term.

Because tailpipe emissions rules pertain to the average mileage per gallon of all vehicles sold by a carmaker, stringent standards are designed to force auto companies to sell more electric cars to offset the sales of conventional pickup trucks, sports utility vehicles and other models that get low mileage. The Ford F-150, for example, is the nation's most popular vehicle and gets only about 20 miles per gallon.

Some major automakers have publicly pledged to invest in electric vehicles. G.M. has said it will go all electric by 2035. Ford has announced \$30 billion in investments in electrification and has said that it intends to sell only electric vehicles in leading markets like the U.S., China and Europe no later than 2035, and globally by 2040. Ford has built an electric version of the F-150; dealers will be taking orders beginning in January.

At the same time, automakers have said they need help from the government to ensure that consumers can buy and charge up their cars.

"E.P.A.'s final rule for greenhouse gas emissions is even more aggressive than originally proposed, requiring a substantial increase in electric vehicle sales, well above the 4 percent of all light-duty sales today," John Bozzella, president of the Alliance for Automotive Innovation, a lobbying group that

represents the world's largest auto companies. "Achieving the goals of this final rule will undoubtedly require enactment of supportive governmental policies — including consumer incentives, substantial infrastructure growth, fleet requirements, and support for U.S. manufacturing and supply chain development."

General Motors on Monday issued a statement saying it "supports the goal of the final rule and its intention to significantly reduce emissions," but is still reviewing the details. Ford said "we applaud E.P.A.'s efforts to strengthen greenhouse gas emissions standards and create a consistent national plan."

And Stellantis, the company formed after the merger of Fiat Chrysler and Peugeot, called the new rule "aggressive" and said it underscored the need for the government to support a transition to zero-emitting vehicles.

Most Republicans, meanwhile, oppose new tailpipe regulations. "Biden's inflation and energy crisis is hurting families and creating record-high costs," Cathy McMorris Rodgers, the ranking Republican on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, wrote on Twitter on Monday. "Instead of helping families, he's putting radical environmentalists first with strict regulations that dictate the cars we buy and drive."

Autoworkers [have expressed concerns](#) over the electric transition because the production of an electric vehicle requires about one-third less human labor than a vehicle powered by an internal combustion engine. Mr. Biden has sought to win them over with policies like the proposed tax credits that would reward buyers for purchasing union-made electric vehicles.

On Monday, Ray Curry, the president of the United Auto Workers, hailed the standards as "well thought out," adding, "history has demonstrated that strong standards based on input from stakeholders that include American workers at the table can be an opportunity for both job retention, job creation and environmental protections."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Drones tip balance in Ethiopia civil war
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/world/africa/drones-ethiopia-war-turkey-emirates.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News
GIST	<p>NAIROBI, Kenya — After Ethiopia's embattled prime minister pulled off a stunning military victory earlier this month, reversing a rebel march on the capital that threatened to overthrow him, he credited the bravery of his troops.</p> <p>"Ethiopia is proud of your unbelievable heroism," the jubilant leader, Abiy Ahmed, told his troops on the battlefield at Kombolcha, on Dec. 6. "You were our confidence when we said Ethiopia would never lose."</p> <p>In reality, the reason for the reversal in Mr. Abiy's fortunes was hovering in the skies above: a fleet of combat drones, recently acquired from allies in the Persian Gulf region and elsewhere who are determined to keep him in power.</p> <p>Over the past four months, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Iran have quietly supplied Mr. Abiy with some of the latest armed drones, even as the United States and African governments were urging a cease-fire and peace talks, according to two Western diplomats who have been briefed on the crisis and spoke on condition of anonymity.</p> <p>The motives of Mr. Abiy's suppliers varied: to make money; to gain an edge in a strategic region; and to back a winner in the spiraling conflict that has engulfed Africa's second most populous nation. But the impact of the drones was striking — pummeling Tigrayan rebels and their supply convoys as they pushed down a major highway toward the capital, Addis Ababa. The rebels have since retreated roughly 270 miles by road to the north, erasing months of battlefield gains.</p>

On Sunday, the Tigray leader, Debretsion Gebremichael, told the United Nations he had ordered an immediate withdrawal of all forces to the borders of Tigray, citing, among other factors, “the drones provided by foreign powers.”

In a letter to Secretary General Antonio Guterres, Mr. Debretsion called for a cease-fire followed by peace talks. “We trust that our bold act of withdrawal will be a decisive opening for peace,” he wrote.

On Monday, his spokesman said that a wave of Ethiopian air strikes inside Tigray had [killed 18 civilians and wounded 11](#).

An Ethiopian government spokeswoman did not respond to questions about the use of drones.

The demonstration of drone power confirmed that Ethiopia’s year-old conflict, largely a regional affair until now, has been internationalized. And it adds the country to a growing list of conventional conflicts, like those in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, where combat drones have become a significant factor in the fight, or even the dominant one.

“Increasingly, unmanned systems are becoming a game changer,” said Peter W. Singer, an expert on drone warfare at New America, a research group in Washington. “It’s not just about the raw capability of the drones themselves — it’s the multiplying effect they have on nearly every other human and system on the battlefield.”

For Mr. Abiy, the drones arrived just in time.

He launched a military campaign in Tigray in November 2020, a year after he won the Nobel Peace Prize, [in coordination](#) with the leader of neighboring Eritrea. But his forces suffered a humiliating defeat last summer when Tigrayan rebels forced them from Tigray, then started to push south. By late November the Tigrayans were approaching the city of Debre Birhan, about 85 miles north of Addis Ababa.

But they could go no further. Swarms of drones appeared overhead, striking soldiers and supply convoys, Gen. Tsadkan Gebretensae, a leading Tigrayan commander, said in an interview with The New York Times.

“At one time, there were 10 drones in the sky,” he said. “You can imagine the effect. We were an easy target.”

Mr. Abiy built his drone arsenal by tapping the sympathy of foreign autocrats and a booming segment of the global arms trade.

Even as he talked about negotiations, Mr. Abiy was turning to other countries to bolster his military. Nearly every day, [cargo flights arrived](#) from a military base in the United Arab Emirates, one of Mr. Abiy’s closest allies.

The Emiratis had trained Mr. Abiy’s Republican Guard and provided crucial military support at the start of the war, running drone strikes that took out Tigrayan artillery and weapons depots, a Western official and a former Ethiopian official said.

The Emirati strikes stopped in January after President Biden came to power, under pressure from Washington. But they have resumed in recent months, largely in the form of the latest Chinese-made drones, the officials said.

The Emirati drone strikes, under the direction of the national security adviser [Tahnoun bin Zayed al-Nahyan](#), appear to be a snub to American diplomatic efforts to end the war. American officials say they are trying to draw the U.A.E. into peace efforts as an ally, but that cooperation is limited.

In a meeting with the United States regional envoy, Jeffrey Feltman, earlier this week, Sheikh al-Nahyan denied that his country was shipping weapons to Ethiopia, an American official with knowledge of the meeting said.

By contrast, Mr. Abiy's dealings with Turkey have been relatively open.

He signed a military pact in August with Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose Bayraktar TB2 drone played a decisive role in Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh. It is manufactured by a company run by Mr. Erdogan's son-in-law.

Turkish drones are attractive to many African countries seeking battle-tested, relatively cheap hardware with few strings attached. "Even in Africa, everywhere I go, they want U.A.V.s," Mr. Erdogan boasted in October after a tour of Nigeria, Togo and Angola. (Drones are also known as unmanned aerial vehicles).

After Bayraktar drones appeared in Ethiopia recently, Turkish officials insisted the drone sale was a purely commercial activity — defense and aviation exports to Ethiopia rose to \$95 million this year, up from \$235,000 in 2020, the Turkish Exporters Assembly reported.

But in recent days, Turkish officials have privately claimed to have frozen exports to Ethiopia, apparently in response to international pressure over a war that has become a byword for atrocities and starvation. At least 400,000 people are living in famine-like conditions, according to the United Nations.

In response to reports of civilians killed, detained or expelled, the United Nations Human Rights Council [agreed](#) on Friday to set up a commission to investigate abuses and identify perpetrators — the latest of many international initiatives that, until now, have failed to stop the suffering.

Mr. Abiy, meanwhile, is focused on his military campaign and its foreign sponsors. On Friday he landed in Istanbul for the Turkey-Africa Partnership Summit — a two-day gathering of leaders from 39 African countries that, analysts say, is also a forum for Turkish arms sales.

His embrace of Iranian drones, although much less powerful than the Chinese or Turkish-made models, has further strained his relations with Washington.

Since August a number of cargo flights have arrived in Ethiopia operated by Iranian airlines that the U.S. has accused of being fronts for the [Quds Force](#), the expeditionary wing of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Flight-tracking blogs have [made note of the shipments](#) as well.

American officials in Addis Ababa have made private representations to Mr. Abiy about the Iranian flights, urging him to cut them off, a United States official said.

Mr. Abiy's drone army remains modest: By several estimates, he has no more than a few dozen combat drones at his disposal, and they can be expensive to run, repair and supply with weapons. But they remain a potent threat to the Tigrayan forces, which themselves have no access to drones.

Mr. Singer, the drone expert, said the experimentation with drone warfare in Ethiopia and Libya has parallels with the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, when outside powers used the fight to test new military technologies and to gauge international reaction to determine what they could get away with. "It's a combination of war and battle lab," he said.

But, he added, technology is no guarantee of victory. "The U.S. had drones in Afghanistan, yet the Taliban managed to hold out for 20 years," he said. "Human will is what determines the outcome of war."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Sniffle anxiety: is it a cold or is it covid?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/nyregion/common-cold-coronavirus-anxiety.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=New%20York

The symptoms of the common cold are typically a stuffy head, the sniffles and body aches.

Now, this season, there's a new one: panic.

As the latest coronavirus variant races through recently reopened offices, holiday parties and family gatherings, signs of an ailment that was once an annoying winter perennial — eased with bed rest and chicken soup — now set minds racing. In New York City, the slightest sniffle has people canceling holiday plans and packing coronavirus testing centers, where in recent days lines have stretched for blocks.

Is it a cold? Or is it Covid?

With new information that the highly contagious Omicron variant can penetrate two vaccine shots and a booster, it has become emotionally upending to feel under the weather, New Yorkers say.

“Having other ailments in the middle of a pandemic feels almost like an insult,” said Tal Lavin, a 32-year-old author from Manhattan, who has taken three at-home coronavirus tests — all negative — since she came down with an apparent cold last week. “I have thought so much about this disease for the past two years that any potential brush with it feels a bit monumental.”

Many cannot shed overwhelming anxiety in the face of Covid, a pathogen that has killed [more than 800,000 Americans](#) — even when tests and retests have shown that they actually have a more mundane illness.

Despite receiving negative tests, some people keep burning through at-home coronavirus swabs just to stay calm. Others with in-the-clear test results and drippy noses say they are still secluding or masking even at home until the sneezing stops — just in case.

The worry is particularly intense because last year, many people had fewer colds and flus: Behavior changes and measures put in place to quell the coronavirus also reduced the transmission of other bugs. This season, as Zoom social hours and virtual school have been replaced with in-person parties and classrooms, the flu and other bugs are slinking back, according to public health officials.

When vaccination began last winter, there was a bullish belief in the vaccines' near-total protection that has since given way to a grim new understanding: Wily strains of coronavirus can still break through, though vaccination greatly reduces serious illness.

And now, the virus is newly resurgent.

In the Northeast, and New York State, an epicenter when the coronavirus first made inroads into North America in 2020, the positivity rate tripled in just three days last week. On Sunday, New York State reported [22,478 new coronavirus cases](#), the highest single-day total since the outset of the pandemic, though testing was not as widely available in the first wave last year. Increasingly widespread vaccinations have helped keep hospitalization rates comparatively low. About [1,100 people are hospitalized in New York City](#) now; at the peak in April of 2020, 15,000 people were hospitalized.

Public health officials nationwide are bracing as cases have begun to creep up in most of the country, even as scientists [scramble to understand Omicron's severity](#), and concern is great about its toll on areas with low vaccination rates.

At the same time garden variety illnesses are on the rise. As social-distancing and masking guidelines and behaviors have relaxed, influenza infections have begun to increase as they usually do this time of year, according to the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

As people plan Christmas travel and New Year's Eve parties, that convergence of illnesses, experts say, means that there is merit to hypervigilance.

Health officials encourage people who are experiencing symptoms and who believe they have been exposed to the coronavirus to get tested and to avoid social activity.

“If it is not Covid, we still don’t want these other viruses spread around,” said Dr. Emily Lutterloh, the director of the Division of Epidemiology at the New York State Department of Health. “It is still prudent to stay home, and the same mitigation measures that will help Covid from spreading are likely to help stop these.”

When Julia Edmunds, 29, from Williamsburg, Brooklyn, who is vaccinated, began to feel run-down last week, she was sure it was a cold. “It is a stressful thing, you don’t want to feel a cold is Covid,” Ms. Edmunds said. On Friday she found out it was the coronavirus.

There is a distinction between reasonable fear and anxiety that becomes disproportionate and all-consuming, said Dr. Itai Danovitch, the chair of the department of psychiatry and behavioral neurosciences at Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. A [meta-analysis of dozens of community-based studies](#) on mental health and the coronavirus showed that anxiety among the general population has increased threefold during the pandemic.

But in such tumultuous times, a certain level of anxiety is understandable, he said.

“It is important to normalize how people are feeling: Anxiety and fear are common, it’s OK to feel anxiety, it’s OK to feel low, it’s OK to feel some distress,” Dr. Danovitch said.

Since Rachel McEneny, of Albany, N.Y., began sniffing last Saturday, she has taken two rapid tests, both negative. Yet when a housekeeper came to her home, Ms. McEneny drove her car in circles around the neighborhood with her dog, Yaeger, afraid that she might give her employee the coronavirus in the remote case that both tests had produced a false negative.

As Ms. McEneny’s illness dragged on, she was unconvinced by the at-home test results and took a P.C.R. test on Thursday. She began wearing a mask when watching television with her teenage daughter.

“You are wearing a mask and you’re hiding from people and you’re absolutely miserable and you’re so worried,” said Ms. McEneny, 49, the commissioner of administrative services for Albany, who considered canceling her Christmas dinner plans. Compounding her anxiety, she added, is the stigma of being sick in public — with anything — in the coronavirus era.

“The minute I hack people wince being around you — and I do it too,” she said. “Socially you don’t want to be part of that.” Late Friday evening she got her results back: Her illness was not Covid.

For many workers, the rigmarole of sorting out which illness they have — a cold they can handle with Gatorade and NyQuil, or the coronavirus, for which health officials recommend a period of isolation — can translate into lost wages or worry that they are leaving their employers in the lurch.

Brianna Lue, 21, from East New York, Brooklyn, felt obligated to stay home from the day care center where she works and to notify everyone she’d come in contact with that she was feeling poorly last week. “You have to tell your boss, you have to tell your family members, you have to tell your significant other,” Ms. Lue said. “I don’t have any other word for it than ‘exhausting.’”

On Friday she received a negative test, but the worry had not abated: On a date with her boyfriend in Washington Square Park that evening, she sat scrolling on her phone through a website that purported to show the likelihood of having Covid-19 based on different colors of phlegm.

Parker Burbridge, an artist's assistant who lives in SoHo, thought the congestion she felt was probably nothing to worry about: After all, she was vaccinated and boosted. Still, on Friday morning Ms. Burbridge got tested, waiting in line for two-and-a-half hours, she said.

"The fear is back, and everybody within a couple days has just completely lost it," Ms. Burbridge told a reporter on Friday afternoon, adding she was not overly concerned.

Then, 17 minutes later, she sent a text message. "Oh no I just tested positive," Ms. Burbridge wrote. "I take it back!"

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 EU agency authorizes Novavax vaccine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/health/covid-novavax-europe.html
GIST	<p>The European Commission on Monday authorized a Covid-19 vaccine made by Novavax, making it the fifth vaccine available in the 27 nations of the European Union.</p> <p>"At a time where the Omicron variant is rapidly spreading, and where we need to step up vaccination and the administration of boosters, I am particularly pleased with today's authorization of the Novavax vaccine," Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, said in a statement.</p> <p>But it's not yet clear how well the vaccine, known as Nuvaxovid, will work against the contagious new Omicron variant. And there may not be much demand for the new vaccine in Europe, which is already flush with vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech and other sources.</p> <p>Novavax, based in Maryland, last year won \$1.7 billion in support from the United States government to develop a vaccine made of proteins from the coronavirus. Despite the lavish support, Novavax lagged behind the vaccine developers Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, and struggled with its clinical trials and manufacturing.</p> <p>Eventually, however, Novavax demonstrated that its vaccine could offer strong protection. In a final report published last week in The New England Journal of Medicine, company researchers found that Nuvaxovid was 90 percent effective against symptomatic infection and 100 percent effective against moderate to severe disease.</p> <p>Protein-based vaccines have been used for decades and generally have a strong track record of safety and mild side effects. Nuvaxovid's side effects are usually mild or moderate and clear up within a couple days.</p> <p>Novavax teamed up with the Serum Institute of India as a manufacturing partner, and in recent weeks the new vaccine had a string of regulatory successes. Indonesia and the Philippines authorized the vaccine last month.</p> <p>The World Health Organization last week granted Nuvaxovid an emergency-use listing, a seal of approval that accelerates the adoption of vaccines in countries that cannot conduct large-scale reviews of their own.</p> <p>Already, Novavax has lined up a number of purchase orders. The company also plans to supply 1.1 billion doses to Covax, a consortium that seeks to distribute vaccines to countries around the world. In a Nov. 4 earnings call, Novavax officials said that they anticipated producing over two billion doses in 2022.</p> <p>In August, the European Commission agreed to purchase up to 200 million doses of the vaccine. The commission authorized Nuvaxovid after a recommendation issued on Monday by the European Medicines Agency.</p> <p>In a statement, Novavax said that it expected initial doses to arrive in Europe in January.</p>

But Europe has been using other vaccines for nearly a year, and the European Commission has locked up an abundant supply, with an agreement for up to 2.4 billion doses from Pfizer-BioNTech alone.

On Monday, Pfizer-BioNTech [announced](#) that an agreement was reached with the European Commission to purchase over 200 million doses in 2022. Those would be in addition to the 450 million doses already set to be delivered in 2022.

Novavax is introducing its vaccine at a moment when the pandemic is undergoing a global shift. The Omicron variant, which can [evade some of the immunity provided by existing vaccines](#), is rapidly rising to dominance [in much of Europe](#) and elsewhere.

The company is investigating how well Omicron can evade antibodies produced by two doses of Nuvaxovid but has yet to release results of the experiment.

In a small clinical trial in South Africa, Novavax found that another variant, called Beta, [drastically reduced the efficacy of the vaccine](#) to less than 50 percent. That efficacy may have been unusually low because some of the volunteers in the study had H.I.V. and thus had weakened immune systems. Novavax estimated that the efficacy of the vaccine against Beta was 60 percent in people without H.I.V.

In studies of other vaccines, researchers have found that Omicron is [consistently better](#) at evading vaccines than Beta. That raises the possibility that Nuvaxovid will prove even less effective at preventing Omicron infections than those caused by Beta.

“We can’t speculate on Omicron until we see the data,” said Alison Chartan, a spokeswoman for Novavax. Nuvaxovid may be more useful as a source of booster shots. This month, British researchers [reported](#) that when people switched from other vaccines to Nuvaxovid for their boosters, the vaccine could raise antibody levels against the coronavirus. If the levels are high enough, they may provide strong protection against Omicron.

This month, Novavax announced it was developing [an Omicron-specific version](#) of its vaccine and said it would test the new vaccine in the next few weeks. Novavax has said that it expects to submit an application to the Food and Drug Administration in the United States by the end of December.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 DHS to plug border wall ‘gaps’
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/20/dhs-plug-gaps-biden-left-trumps-border-wall/
GIST	<p>The Department of Homeland Security announced Monday that it will restart the construction of President Trump’s border wall, moving to plug “gaps” left in place after President Biden ordered all work to stop on his first day in office.</p> <p>The department said it will fix gates and build out the access roads that Border Patrol agents use to respond to incursions, moving to stiffen physical defenses as the surge of illegal border crossings from Mexico continues at a record pace.</p> <p>Homeland Security said Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas gave the OK for the construction, which will touch on spots along the border from Del Rio, Texas, to San Diego.</p> <p>He characterized the work as a matter of safety and environmental upgrades. Others said it will help reduce the incentive to attempt the trip north.</p> <p>“Today’s announcement of increased border wall infrastructure and gates are a step in the right direction,” said Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio, the top Republican on the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.</p>

He said the administration must close “all the gaps” and finish installing the technology that was supposed to be part of the wall system but was halted by the Biden team.

The announcement marks a backtrack for Mr. Biden, who last year vowed “not another foot” of wall would be built on his watch.

That was always a hard promise to keep.

Early on, Mr. Mayorkas signaled that holes left by Mr. Biden’s Inauguration Day construction halt had become a problem and would need to be filled.

The Washington Times reported exclusively in April that Mr. Mayorkas told employees at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement that Mr. Biden’s construction pause left room to fill “gaps,” finish “gates” and install technology in areas where the barrier was built but the lights and sensors were not.

It wasn’t clear Monday how much mileage will be constructed.

Homeland Security made the announcement just two days after Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, unveiled the first section of border wall built on state land, using state money. The governor said his state was stepping up “while President Biden has sat idly by.”

The wall was the most visible of Mr. Trump’s campaign promises and perhaps the one on which he delivered the most concrete results, with nearly 460 miles of barrier erected. Most of that replaced dilapidated or outdated designs, but 47 miles of border were sealed off for the first time.

Mr. Trump said at the end of his tenure that the wall was almost finished, but his administration had planned another 285 miles. More than 200 of those miles were already plotted out and under contract.

Along with the wall came technology and access roads, which some Border Patrol agents say are even more important than the barrier because they allow agents to respond more quickly to stop incursions.

Mr. Biden’s construction halt threw all of that into disarray.

In southern Arizona, several miles of roads were built, but the wall wasn’t finished. Smugglers barreled through the gaps and used the government’s roads to speed deeper into the U.S., according to local law enforcement officials.

Mr. Portman said he visited a wall construction site in Texas in March and saw building materials on the ground.

The government was paying \$3 million a day to guard those kinds of locations across the border, according to a July report from Sen. James Lankford, Oklahoma Republican. He said personnel had to be deployed to guard gates left unfinished by Mr. Biden’s halt of construction.

Mr. Lankford concluded that the administration was wasting billions of dollars by refusing to finish the Trump administration’s plan.

Reviving wall construction is just one of several ways the Biden administration has embraced Trump-era get-tough policies.

Homeland Security has resurrected the “Remain in Mexico” policy, which pushes illegal immigrants back across the border into Mexico to wait for their immigration hearings rather than releasing them into the U.S.

The department was under a court order to revive that program, officially known as the Migrant Protection Protocols.

Mr. Biden also faces legal pressure to use more than \$2 billion that Congress approved for the wall system but was left unspent.

The Government Accountability Office, in an opinion this year, said a pause was not illegal but the president could not outright cancel construction. At some point, he had to spend it on the purpose Congress intended, though it could go through additional environmental studies to figure the best way, the GAO ruled.

Homeland Security called on Congress on Monday to rescind the money.

Mr. Biden's January order to pause work meant worksites were abandoned amid construction. Except for tying down exposed rods or securing other dangerous areas, workers were forbidden from taking any steps.

Homeland Security said it will complete drainage, install erosion control measures and finish access and patrol roads. It also teased the work on the wall by saying it will be "closing small gaps that remain open from prior construction activities and remediating incomplete gates."

The work plan did not mention technology, which Mr. Portman said is integral to border security.

Mr. Trump's wall was far more expensive than previous versions because it was taller and was an integrated system of lights and sensors to help detect intrusions.

The Trump team, rushing to meet the president's mileage goals, pushed to finish as much of the fence as possible in 2020, but it didn't build out all the technology. A GAO report said more than 450 miles of barrier were erected but just 69 miles had both fencing and technology.

"While the wall panels are typically the most costly part of border barrier construction, the full wall system remains incomplete," the GAO said.

The wall was relatively unpopular while Mr. Trump was in office, with more people opposing construction than supporting it. Support has risen with Mr. Trump out of office and with the worst year on record for illegal border crossings.

A Washington Times survey of 4,000 voters, taken in late November and early December, found 53% said the wall was "an effective way to stop illegal immigrants," compared with 40% who disagreed.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Russia warns of military action on Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/20/russia-warns-military-action-fears-mount-christmas/
GIST	<p>Russia upped the ante Monday in its dangerous standoff with Ukraine, openly warning of military action if President Biden and America's NATO allies ignore a list of demands Moscow announced late last week — a far-reaching list that some key U.S. lawmakers have dubbed a "pretext to war."</p> <p>Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said his country is fully prepared to respond through "military-technical means" if Western powers fail to address those demands. He said NATO must not expand to include Ukraine or Georgia and the U.S. must not base additional military assets in former Soviet republics in Central Asia. Most of Moscow's proposed security guarantees seemingly have little chance of becoming a reality. Still, some foreign policy specialists warn that Russian President Vladimir Putin could use their rejection to justify a major land invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>Russia's proposal and the direct threat of military action put renewed pressure on the White House to defuse a crisis that seems to be nearing the boiling point.</p>

U.S. officials have said Mr. Putin's list of demands is unrealistic but could be the starting point for easing tensions in Ukraine and letting diplomacy take the place of saber-rattling. At the same time, the U.S. and the European Union say they are preparing unprecedented sanctions on Moscow if the Kremlin moves militarily against Kyiv.

How much of what Russia has sought is bluster and how much is non-negotiable are the big questions. Some of Mr. Putin's key advisers are doing little to ease the tensions.

"I said that we would find forms to respond, including by military and military-technical means," Mr. Ryabkov said, according to Russia's state-run Tass news agency. "I reaffirm this. We will have to balance the activities that are of concern to us because they increase the risks with our countermeasures."

He did not elaborate on what those actions might be, but Russia's military posture offers unmistakable clues.

Nearly 100,000 Russian troops are stationed near the country's border with Ukraine. The Russian military buildup has stoked fears that Mr. Putin is prepared to seize another portion of its smaller and weaker neighbor by force, just as he did with the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

Russia also backs separatists who have been battling the Ukrainian military since 2014 in the country's disputed Donbas region.

It's not clear whether Mr. Putin is willing to endure the casualties and the economic blowback that would result from a long-term ground war in Ukraine, but some Western governments are growing increasingly worried that military action is on the horizon.

The British Daily Star reported Monday that intelligence officials privately warned U.K. officials that Russia might launch an invasion on Christmas Eve. U.S. intelligence analysts have said Russia's buildup could give it an invasion force by early next year but Mr. Putin has not decided whether to invade or stand down.

In another sign of uneasiness in the region, the State Department issued a new travel warning for Ukraine. It specifically cited reports that war may be in the offing in the former Soviet republic.

"U.S. citizens should be aware of reports that Russia is planning for significant military action against Ukraine," the State Department said in its travel advisory. "U.S. citizens choosing to travel to Ukraine should be aware that Russian military action anywhere in Ukraine would severely impact the U.S. Embassy's ability to provide consular services, including assistance to U.S. citizens in departing Ukraine."

Further complicating Washington's task is the hard-line stance of many smaller countries that border Russia with a long history of pressure and intimidation from Moscow.

The leaders of Poland and Lithuania met Monday with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. They called for even tougher sanctions on Russia and rejected any compromise in the face of Moscow's security demands.

"Everything must be done" to prevent Russian military aggression against Ukraine, Polish President Andrzej Duda told reporters in the Ukrainian village of Huta. It is "absolutely undesirable to yield to such an ultimatum, to such blackmail."

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda called Russia's attempts to unilaterally lay down security red lines "unacceptable in Europe in the 21st century."

Backing diplomacy

The Biden administration has doubled down on finding a diplomatic solution. Mr. Biden and Mr. Putin spoke via video conference earlier this month. White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan spoke with his Russian counterpart by phone Monday and “indicated U.S. readiness to engage in diplomacy through multiple channels, including bilateral engagement” and in other forums, according to a readout of the call.

State Department officials, meanwhile, tried to strike a balance between keeping the door open for negotiations with Moscow and taking a hard line against the Kremlin’s aggression.

“Any dialogue, any diplomacy has to be based on the principles of reciprocity,” State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters. “We are having this discussion in the context of Russia’s ongoing aggression against Ukraine, but in some ways this is bigger than any one country.

“No country has the right to dictate borders, to bully smaller countries, to intimidate, to coerce, to pursue their own interests,” he said. “That is not something the United States, that is not something our partners or allies will stand for.”

Russia’s demands ostensibly are about protecting national security. That includes preventing a military alliance formed to contain it — NATO — from bringing troops and arms to states along Russia’s western border. Still, many of the specifics are aimed at a much broader goal long advocated by Mr. Putin: establishing new limits on American military activities around the world.

One section of Moscow’s proposal states: “The parties shall refrain from deploying their armed forces and armaments ... in the areas where such deployment could be perceived by the other party as a threat to its national security, with the exception of such deployment within the national territories of the parties.

“The parties shall refrain from flying heavy bombers equipped for nuclear or non-nuclear armaments or deploying surface warships of any type, including in the framework of international organizations, military alliances or coalitions, in the areas outside national airspace and national territorial waters respectively, from where they can attack targets in the territory of the other party,” it says.

Such an agreement would directly impact America’s military posture in Europe and elsewhere around the world.

Although the U.S. isn’t seriously entertaining such proposals, some lawmakers say Mr. Putin has a more sinister aim: creating the threat of a crisis in order to extract concessions from NATO and the U.S.

“The Russian government’s publication of ‘proposals’ for the United States and NATO is an insult to diplomacy and seeks to extort us into ending a crisis Russia itself created. These are not security agreements, but a list of concessions the United States and NATO must make to appease Putin,” Sen. James E. Risch, Idaho Republican and ranking member on the House Foreign Relations Committee, said in a statement over the weekend. “The Russian Federation made these demands with the full understanding they are impossible to accept. ... Russia is clearly trying to create a pretext for war.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 D.C. mayor declares state of emergency
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/20/dc-mayor-declares-state-emergency-covid-19/
GIST	<p>D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser declared a state of emergency for COVID-19 and reinstated a mask mandate on Monday, after Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan announced he has tested positive for the disease.</p> <p>Meanwhile, several schools around the metropolitan area have resumed online instruction amid a surge of coronavirus infections.</p> <p>In the District, the citywide mask order starts at 6 a.m. Tuesday and lasts until Jan. 31. Under the state of emergency, the District will expand testing and require city government workers to get boosters as part of the vaccine mandate with no test out option.</p>

“I think we’re all tired of it [COVID-19],” Miss Bowser said. “But we have to respond to what’s happening in our city and what’s happening in our nation. And we have to continue to focus on keeping the critical parts of our government open starting with schools, our other government operations and making sure our vulnerable populations can be supported as well.”

The District is adding nine more COVID-19 test pickup and drop-off sites, which opened at noon Monday: Deanwood Recreation Center, Kenilworth Recreation Center, Ridge Road Recreation Center, Ferebee Hope Recreation Center, Southeast Library, Northeast Library, Palisades Neighborhood Library, Takoma Park Neighborhood Library and Riggs-Lasalle Recreation Center.

The D.C. Health Department has ordered 1,050,000 rapid antigen tests, according to Patrick Ashley, the agency’s senior deputy director. He said 42,000 tests are on hand and 200,000 are in transit.

Starting Wednesday, the rapid tests will be available six days a week at eight neighborhood libraries: Mt. Pleasant Library, West End Library, Cleveland Park Library, Petworth Library, Woodridge Library, Shaw (Watha T. Daniel) Library, Capitol View Library and Anacostia Library.

Each library will have 1,000 kits a day, but that will increase as supply increases. Residents can get two free rapid tests per day and will need to show proof of residency.

As part of a return from winter break, students, teachers and staff at D.C. public schools and public charter schools will be given rapid antigen tests. The schools will receive 100,000 rapid tests.

D.C. public schools will be closed for instruction Jan. 3-4 so that staff and families of students can use those days to pick up rapid antigen tests.

The city reported a daily case rate of about 43 COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents as of Thursday, a metric that is in the “red zone” and an increase from a rate of about 12 cases the month prior, the most recent health data shows. About 3% of the COVID-19 infections are from the omicron variant, according to Dr. Anjali Talwalkar from D.C. Health Department.

In Maryland, Mr. Hogan announced he’s tested positive for COVID-19 on Monday, a day after he said the state would not shut down again as a coronavirus precaution.

“This morning, as part of my regular testing routine, I received a positive rapid test for COVID-19. I have been vaccinated and boosted, and I am feeling fine at the moment,” Mr. Hogan tweeted.

In Prince George’s County, public school students transitioned to virtual learning Monday, which will last until Thursday before winter break starts. Virtual learning will continue Jan. 3-14.

In-person instruction will resume Jan. 18 after the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, and students in the K-6 virtual program will return Jan. 31, said Monica Goldson, the school system’s chief officer.

Montgomery County Public Schools said Monday it is trying to keep its schools open. Interim Superintendent Monifa McKnight said officials will consider individual school closures in January if 5% or more of unrelated students, teachers and staff (for a minimum of 10), test positive in a 14-day period.

Maryland reported a 15% test positivity rate on Sunday, an increase from about 4.5% on Dec. 1, according to state health data. The state this month is reporting more than 1,000 daily new COVID-19 cases for the most part, with some days exceeding 2,000 and 3,000 new infections. Comparatively, there were usually fewer than 1,000 cases reported during the month of November.

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/21/who-chief-warns-over-festive-gatherings-an-event-cancelled-is-better-than-a-life-cancelled-omicron
GIST	<p>The head of the World Health Organization (WHO) has warned that holiday festivities would in many places lead to “increased cases, overwhelmed health systems and more deaths” and urged people to postpone gatherings.</p> <p>“An event cancelled is better than a life cancelled,” Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.</p> <p>Tedros said the Omicron variant was spreading faster than the Delta variant and was causing infections in people already vaccinated or who have recovered from the Covid-19 disease.</p> <p>WHO chief scientist Soumya Swaminathan added it would be “unwise” to conclude from early evidence that Omicron was a milder variant that previous ones ... with the numbers going up, all health systems are going to be under strain,” Soumya Swaminathan told Geneva-based journalists.</p> <p>The variant is successfully evading some immune responses, she said, meaning that the booster programmes being rolled out in many countries ought to be targeted towards people with weaker immune systems.</p> <p>“There is now consistent evidence that Omicron is spreading significantly faster than the Delta variant,” Tedros told the briefing.</p> <p>“And it is more likely people vaccinated or recovered from Covid-19 could be infected or re-infected,” Tedros said.</p> <p>Their comments echoed the finding of study by Imperial College London, which said last week the risk of reinfection was more than five times higher and it has shown no sign of being milder than Delta.</p> <p>WHO officials said however that other forms of immunity vaccinations may prevent infection and disease. While the antibody defences from some actions have been undermined, there has been hope that T-cells, the second pillar of an immune response, can prevent severe disease by attacking infected human cells.</p> <p>WHO expert Abdi Mahamud added: “Although we are seeing a reduction in the neutralisation antibodies, almost all preliminary analysis shows T-cell mediated immunity remains intact, that is what we really require.”</p> <p>However, highlighting how little is known about how to handle the new variant that was only detected last month, Swaminathan also said: “Of course there is a challenge, many of the monoclonals will not work with Omicron.”</p> <p>She gave no details as she referred to the treatments that mimic natural antibodies in fighting off infections. Some drug makers have suggested the same.</p> <p>But the WHO team also offered some hope to a weary world facing the new wave that 2022 would be the year that the pandemic, which already killed more than 5.6 million people worldwide, would end.</p> <p>It pointed towards the development of second and third generation vaccines, and the further development of antimicrobial treatments and other innovations.</p> <p>“(We) hope to consign this disease to a relatively mild disease that is easily prevented, that is easily treated,” Mike Ryan, the WHO’s top emergency expert, told the briefing.</p> <p>“If we can keep virus transmission to minimum, then we can bring the pandemic to an end.”</p> <p>However Tedros also said China, where the Sars-CoV-2 coronavirus was first detected at the end of 2019, must be forthcoming with data and information related to its origin to help the response going forward.</p>

	<p>“We need to continue until we know the origins, we need to push harder because we should learn from what happened this time in order to (do) better in the future,” he said.</p> <p>“2022 must be the year we end the pandemic.”</p> <p>Since it was first reported in South Africa in November, Omicron has been identified in dozens of countries, dashing hopes that the worst of the pandemic is over.</p> <p>Tedros said the strain appears to have the ability to double its infections every 1.5 to three days. “That is really fast.”</p> <p>Tedros pointed out that regardless of the variant’s severity, “the sheer number of cases ... may overwhelm the health system” and more people could die.</p> <p>More than 5.3 million people have died since the start of the pandemic, though the true toll is believed to be several times higher.</p> <p>Many vulnerable people around the world are still waiting for a first vaccine dose, and the UN health agency has said it is better to prioritise them over providing fully vaccinated health adults with boosters.</p> <p>“If we are to end the pandemic in the coming year, we must end inequity,” Tedros said.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 China access to global shipping data
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-growing-access-to-global-shipping-data-worries-u-s-11640001601?mod=hp_list_pos2
GIST	<p>China’s expanding grip on data about the world’s cargo flows is sparking concern in Washington and among industry officials that Beijing could exploit its logistics information for commercial or strategic advantage.</p> <p>Even cargo that never touches Chinese shores often still passes through Beijing’s globe-spanning logistics networks, including through sophisticated data systems that track shipments transiting ports located far from China. Control over the flow of goods and information about them gives Beijing privileged insight into world commerce and potentially the means to influence it, say cargo-industry officials.</p> <p>With ports clogged globally and shortages plaguing many industries, shipping data has become an enormously valuable commodity.</p> <p>Foremost among China’s cargo-data systems is Logink, a digital network that links shippers internationally and describes itself as a “one-stop logistics information service platform.” Logink says it draws on a mix of public databases and information input by more than 450,000 users in China and at dozens of giant ports world-wide, including across the Belt and Road initiative, China’s trillion-dollar international infrastructure project, and as part of what Beijing calls the Digital Silk Road.</p> <p>Logink’s international reach highlights a field critical to the world economy where the West lags behind China. Digitization of cargo data has been a dream of shippers for years.</p> <p>Developed since 2007, not-for-profit Logink is overseen by China’s Ministry of Transportation. Its growing links to overseas ports and logistics networks are starting to draw attention in Washington.</p> <p>Logink’s window into global trade “could give the data holder a treasure trove of intelligence of national security and economic interest,” said Michael Wessel, a commissioner on Congress’s U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, which last week launched a study of the system.</p> <p>“It should be a much higher concern than it has been,” Mr. Wessel said.</p>

The Defense Department sends military equipment via commercial ports world-wide. A spokesman for its logistics arm, Transportation Command, said that through Belt and Road, “China is seeking to enhance its visibility into the global supply chain, including U.S. military logistics.” The spokesman didn’t comment directly on Logink.

Logink and the Chinese Ministry of Transportation didn’t respond to questions about the system.

Officially called the National Public Information Platform for Transportation and Logistics, Logink grew for years inside China, benefiting from the economy’s scale and aggregating cargo data and financial information from shipping, trucking and manufacturing companies. In 2010 Logink began to form partnerships with ports around Asia, promising faster trade flows. More recently it has linked with Belt and Road ports and cargo-data systems in Europe and the Middle East.

Logink’s ability to share information internationally “serves the ‘One Belt One Road’ national strategy,” according to its website, “and has become a ‘Chinese window’ for China to integrate international logistics information exchange and sharing.”

China is expanding its window into world cargo flows as global access to ship-location information in Chinese waters has plunged because of a [new data-privacy law](#) that took effect in November.

Concerns about Logink are similar to those around Chinese telecommunications companies Huawei Technologies Co. and [ZTE Corp.](#) : They all carry other parties’ data that Chinese authorities could exploit to China’s benefit or to the detriment of those who communicate over the networks. By crunching data crossing Logink, China could spot and exploit shortages, gluts and trends before others do, say industry officials.

“The most obvious risk of Logink is that it can help Chinese companies grow faster because of its data insights,” said Mees van der Wiel, a business consultant at Portbase, the digital data network of the Port of Rotterdam, Europe’s largest port.

Chinese state-owned shipping company Cosco in 2018 announced a digital system similar to Logink for Greece, including the giant Port of Piraeus outside Athens, which Cosco controls. Greek maritime business leaders feared the system would give China sensitive information about their commercial operations and even on the Greek navy. The Greek government, pressed by its industry, last January passed a law requiring any such system and the data it collects be controlled only by the state.

A spokesman for Cosco’s Piraeus unit said the company welcomed the government’s announcement of a unified national system and would connect as required.

World-wide, the logistics industry remains heavily reliant on physical documentation, with shippers routinely sending paperwork about sea cargo to its destination by air. An international shipment can pass through more than 40 different entities—including freight handlers, customs agents and port operators—each using different information systems.

To integrate and streamline this, many projects are afoot around the world. They aim to make shipping more efficient and less polluting by collecting and sharing information about the location, routes and contents of ships and millions of shipping containers moving daily.

Most of those efforts are led by ports, private companies and industry alliances. Many struggle to enlist participants because the logistics industry is fiercely competitive, prompting companies to jealously guard data that they fear could hand rivals an edge. At a recent conference on “smart maritime networks” in Copenhagen, successive speakers lamented the industry’s failure to gain efficiency by sharing data.

“In logistics today, the flow of information is as important as the flow of money or goods,” said Inna Kuznetsova, a logistics expert and chief executive of data-analytics company 1010Data in New York.

Portbase in Rotterdam wins over companies by promising that they always maintain ownership of data on the system. Portbase, among the most sophisticated digital shipping hubs outside China, pledges to process data only with owners' permission. But Portbase just covers the Netherlands.

Portbase and Logink in 2019 signed a preliminary cooperation agreement, but progress developing it has been slow during the pandemic and this year the two sides haven't held direct talks, said Mr. van der Wiel. China, in aggregating so much information and easing communication across supply chains, has shown what is possible in digitizing logistics.

"Logink is a masterpiece in technical innovation and would be the envy of other platforms," said Andre Wheeler, a former logistics executive based in Perth, Australia, and now a consultant, who has analyzed Logink for several years. He estimates Logink is a decade ahead of rival systems, which makes it attractive for other countries to link with, "as they can leapfrog the technical development cycle."

Logink allows users of its system to connect and share information much the way Facebook does, said Emily de La Bruyère, a founder of Horizon Advisory, a consulting firm in Washington that studies China's mix of business and politics. The Chinese government's control of Logink also gives it insight into data crossing the network that is similar to Amazon.com's view of commerce across its platform, Ms. de La Bruyère said.

Who has access to data that Logink collects and how much it collects at ports outside China isn't clear. Logink officials and China's Ministry of Transportation didn't respond to questions about its data collection and usage.

Even trade experts who interact with Logink aren't certain about how it operates.

"They make presentations about their system, but we are not really sure what's behind it," said Mr. van der Wiel at Portbase in Rotterdam. He said that if Chinese data-protection rules allow Logink's information to be combined with customs data, "then you really have a gold mine" of information covering pricing, volume and customers.

Mr. Wheeler said his longtime logistics-industry contacts who use Logink are also uncertain how information they enter is processed or used. These people are unwilling to talk publicly about it for fear of running afoul of Chinese authorities, he said.

Isaac Kardon, an assistant professor at the U.S. Naval War College, said Logink's mix of data processing with sea shipping, all on a global scale, fits with China's mix of high- and low-tech to strengthen its geostrategic position. "If you control the information, you can move things around without others knowing, or jumble up someone else's information," he said.

One area of concern cited by analysts familiar with Logink is rare earths. The U.S., seeking to cut reliance on China for the resources—vital in products from cars and electronics to defense systems—has turned to Australia. The close U.S. ally, itself sparring with China over trade and diplomacy, offers what Washington considers a more secure supply of the critical materials through Australian miner Lynas Rare Earths Ltd.

But Lynas currently processes its rare earths in Malaysia, where it passes through at least one Belt and Road port controlled by Chinese state-backed companies, Kuantan.

Lynas Managing Director Amanda Lacaze said Logink is one of several platforms that draw on publicly available customs data and doesn't pose an additional risk. She said that Lynas plans to develop processing capacity in the U.S.

Shipping-data experts say that Logink, through its Belt and Road ties, could gain privileged access to data at Kuantan and other ports. Such data sources might give China insight into the unit prices, precise product

mix and ultimate recipients of shipments, say specialists. The Kuantan Port Authority didn't respond to questions about its use of Logink.

Global data is also being gathered by private companies, such as the Intra ocean-booking platform of E2open LLC, a supply-chain software company in Austin, Texas, that can track roughly one-fourth of the world's container shipments—a subset of the data Logink collects.

Logink's management by the Chinese government, deeply involved in its nation's corporate activities, "changes the dynamic," said E2open Executive Vice President Pawan Joshi. "It's difficult for free enterprises to compete with an incorporated nation."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Tigray rebels to withdraw Ethiopia regions
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/20/tigray-amhara-afar-ethiopia/
GIST	<p>KHARTOUM, Sudan — The spokesman for Tigrayan rebels waging war with Ethiopia's government confirmed Monday that rebel troops would be withdrawing from the neighboring regions of Afar and Amhara, where fierce fighting has displaced more than 300,000 people since July.</p> <p>In a two-page letter sent Sunday to U.N. Secretary General António Guterres, the leader of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, Debretsion Gebremichael, said he hoped that bringing his troops back into the Tigray region would be a "decisive opening for peace."</p> <p>Battles have raged across Afar and Amhara over past months as control over strategic towns and highways repeatedly changed hands. Ethiopia's prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, recently joined his troops on multiple stints in the battlefield. A spokesman for his government did not respond immediately to a request for comment, but both Abiy and other government officials have repeatedly called for the elimination of the TPLF's leadership.</p> <p>The war in Ethiopia, now in its 13th month, has been marked by allegations of large-scale atrocities on both sides, including summary executions, mass rapes and the use of civilians as shields. The northern region of Tigray has been under an effective communications blackout and humanitarian blockade, with only trickles of aid making it through federal government checkpoints. Aid agencies have warned of impending famine and said hundreds of thousands of people are already in near-famine conditions. Reports of Tigrayans being arbitrarily detained across Ethiopia are rife.</p> <p>The withdrawal of TPLF-aligned troops and militias, if it goes ahead, would mark the closest Ethiopia has come to a cease-fire since the war began. It also would signal a major reversal for the TPLF, which had been moving quickly toward the country's capital, Addis Ababa, before a concerted counteroffensive by the Ethiopian military and its allies. At the time, the TPLF's spokesman, Getachew Reda, told The Washington Post that pulling out of Amhara and Afar was "out of the question until the siege on Tigray is lifted."</p> <p>One major sticking point that remains between the two sides is the status of a region on the border with Sudan that until the war belonged to Tigray but has since come under the control of Amhara militias. The Amhara government says the TPLF, which had dominated Ethiopian politics for nearly 30 years before Abiy rose to power, originally annexed the region from Amhara.</p> <p>On a recent trip to the Sudanese border, a Post reporter met with newly arrived refugees who described a systematic campaign to empty the region of Tigrayans. One of them called it the "final stage of ethnic cleansing," reprising a term used by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken as early as March to refer to mass expulsions of Tigrayans from the area.</p> <p>Gizachew Muluneh, the Amhara regional government's spokesman, said in a text message that there would be "no negotiation" over the disputed region. He said the TPLF's intention to withdraw from Amhara did not change his view that the group must be destroyed.</p>

“The people and the land of what they call Western Tigray all belongs to Amhara, so what kind of negotiations would there be?” he wrote. “The TPLF are terrorists who want to take the wealth of Amhara in particular and Ethiopia in general ... and they will not stop until they are defeated.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Omicron fuels a rise in cases; surging
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/us/us-holidays-omicron-cases.html
GIST	<p>With the holiday travel season already underway, new coronavirus cases are surging in the United States, prompting governors and mayors to once again wrestle with how far to go to combat the virus as federal officials said that Omicron has become by far the dominant form of new virus cases in the country.</p> <p>In New York State, reports of new cases shot up more than 80 percent over two weeks. In Washington, D.C., where the mayor reinstated an indoor mask mandate on Monday, more than three times as many infections are being identified each day as at the start of December. In Boston, another place where cases are surging, Mayor Michelle Wu on Monday announced proof-of-vaccination requirements for certain indoor spaces like gyms and restaurants — but notably did not order any places to shut down.</p> <p>“We all remember the gravity and uncertainty as those early weeks turned into months,” the mayor said of the grim spring of 2020, “as schools were shut down along with small businesses, child care and so many parts of our daily support systems.”</p> <p>There is a key difference between then and now, Ms. Wu said as she announced the new measures: “Today, vaccines are available for every adult and even children as young as 5 years old.”</p> <p>On Monday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that Omicron, which accounted for less than 1 percent of new Covid-19 cases in the United States as December began, now accounts for nearly three-quarters of new cases, underlining how stunningly infectious it is.</p> <p>Still, even in hard-hit New York, officials were shying away from widespread lockdowns. In a news conference on Monday, Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York said the city must “move faster” in its response to the latest wave of new cases. The mayor said the city would focus on increasing vaccinations, broadening access to tests and ensuring hospital capacity. But he said that city employees would still be required to work in-person and insisted that another lockdown “would have horrible impacts on the people of this city.”</p> <p>Though the alarming numbers may echo some of the earlier waves of the pandemic, there is also preliminary evidence from South Africa that the Omicron variant may cause less severe disease. Hospital admissions in that country have remained lower than in previous waves. And many in a weary public have grown less tolerant of the most disruptive mitigation measures, like the closing of schools and businesses.</p> <p>President Biden is scheduled to speak to the public about the Omicron variant on Tuesday. He, too, is expected to double down on the importance of vaccinations and boosters, as opposed to school closings and more shutdowns.</p> <p>The president has repeatedly said there will be no need for lockdowns, and the C.D.C. announced new guidelines last week to help schools stay open, by allowing children who are exposed to the coronavirus to “test to stay” instead of having to quarantine at home.</p> <p>Breakthrough Omicron infections are common, but scientists believe that the vaccines will still provide protection against the worst outcomes. Even so, some researchers are worried that the dangerous infectiousness of Omicron poses a threat to the nation’s already strained health system.</p> <p>“We’re in deep trouble,” said William Haseltine, a virologist and former Harvard Medical School professor who is president of Access Health International, a nonprofit global health think tank. He urged</p>

Americans to cancel holiday party and travel plans, work from home and avoid public transportation if possible, and go out only when absolutely necessary — and then wear a mask.

“We should have learned our lesson, but we grossly underestimated this virus and were unprepared for Covid coming back in a newly transmissible and virulent form,” he said. “And we’re going to pay the price.”

One of the most urgent concerns now — as it was during admonitions about “flattening the curve” in the pandemic’s earliest days — is whether the new wave of cases will strain and perhaps even overwhelm hospitals. Some scientists and public health professionals worry this is already happening.

“Our state health care system is currently collapsing,” Dr. Nadine T. Himelfarb, the president of the Rhode Island chapter of the American College of Emergency Physicians, wrote in a letter sent last week to the governor and the director of the state health department.

“Imagine patients dying while waiting to be seen by a doctor who is 50 feet away and, because of lack of staff and thus capacity, simply unable to treat them. This is a true tragedy that is currently unfolding for citizens of Rhode Island.”

The surge is coming as care wards in many hospitals have reached capacity and governors in several states have mobilized the National Guard to help with serious staffing shortages at hospitals. As the explosive growth of Covid-19 cases crowds out other health emergencies, leaders of health care facilities in several states have taken out newspaper ads begging local residents to get vaccinated.

Beth Gaudet, a 42-year-old clinical nurse coordinator at a hospital in southern Maine, said beds were filling up in hospitals around the state at the same time that outbreaks were occurring among hospital staff.

“We’re imploding slowly and staff are getting sick, too,” Ms. Gaudet said. “So if there’s no one to take care of patients, what are we going to do?”

On Sunday, Dr. Jeremy Faust, an emergency physician at Brigham and Women’s Hospital, and William Hanage, an epidemiologist at Harvard, sent a memo to Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the C.D.C. director, outlining a plan to keep Omicron from breaking the hospital system.

“It is possible that uncontrolled spread of Omicron could quickly overwhelm hospital capacity, despite the existing immunity of the population,” they warned, proposing a plan that would automatically impose restrictions on indoor activities if hospital capacity in a state or city reached a certain threshold.

“Whatever the opposite of flattening the curve is, is what Omicron is,” Dr. Faust said in an interview.

The tens of thousands of new cases in recent days have included lawmakers and high-ranking officials, including Gov. Larry Hogan of Maryland, Senators Cory Booker of New Jersey and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and the New York state health commissioner. The past week has seen a cascade of cancellations and postponements, from professional football games to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Plans to return to the office have been scrambled once again and travelers have reluctantly begun, for the second winter, to reconsider their holiday travel.

In Florida, Hawaii and Puerto Rico, where infection levels had been relatively low in recent weeks, explosive case increases had suddenly emerged. In Wisconsin, where hospitals had already been strained by a surge of the Delta variant, public health officials urged residents on Monday to keep holiday gatherings small and to get tested before celebrating with people outside their households.

“We are at another critical moment in this pandemic,” said Karen Timberlake, the secretary-designee for Wisconsin’s health department, who said 96 percent of intensive-care beds in the state were occupied. “The highly contagious Omicron variant of Covid-19 has been detected and is anticipated to cause a rapid increase in disease activity in our state in the coming weeks.”

The unease has spread into the financial markets, with the S&P 500 falling more than 1 percent on Monday, adding to last week's decline of nearly 2 percent.

"For the first time since Omicron appeared we have reason to be nervous about the variant having an impact on the growth trajectory of the economy," said Lindsey Bell, the chief money and markets strategist at Ally Invest, a foreign exchange company.

Though the situation was varied around the country, the overall picture is growing worse by the day.

Many states are still struggling with the Delta variant, which ravaged the country over the summer and fall. While reports of new cases have fallen recently in some Midwestern and Western states that had been hit hard by Delta, those regions could be vulnerable to an influx of Omicron cases. Much of the Northeast, where Omicron is spreading rapidly, had already been in the throes of a Delta-fueled surge this fall.

In a welcome bit of a good news, Moderna announced on Monday that a booster shot of its coronavirus vaccine significantly raises the level of antibodies that can thwart the Omicron variant. The pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and BioNTech had announced this month that a booster shot of their vaccine also increased the level of antibodies against Omicron.

But only about a third of American adults who are fully vaccinated have received a booster. The risk that presents as Omicron approaches is laid bare by the severity of the recent spike in cases in New England, the most vaccinated region of the country.

Nearly 11,000 people in the six New England states are now testing positive for coronavirus every day. Almost all of these states have also seen an uptick in the number of hospitalizations and deaths over the past two weeks.

To New Englanders, and likely to many across the country in the coming days and weeks, this recent pattern has been bleakly familiar — and extremely frustrating.

"We were trending in the right direction with the vaccines," said Ezra Small, 40, who lives in Pittsfield, Mass. He had started seeing friends, if reluctantly, and even celebrated Hanukkah with family members.

Now with the arrival of Omicron, he said he had once again stopped socializing completely. After all the talk of things slowly returning to normal, he said, "it really sucks."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 NHL pauses play amid rapid rise of omicron
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/20/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#nhl-season-pause
GIST	<p>The National Hockey League and its players' association agreed to pause play until next week because of coronavirus problems, becoming the first North American professional sports league to suspend games en masse amid the rapid rise of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>The league said Monday night that it would delay five games that were not already affected by earlier postponements and begin its holiday break early.</p> <p>Infections among players and their close contacts had already prompted delays to nearly four dozen N.H.L. games this season. Earlier Monday, several teams, including the Columbus Blue Jackets, Montreal Canadiens and Edmonton Oilers, said they planned to shut down activities before the holiday break.</p> <p>N.H.L. officials, announcing an agreement with the players' association, said teams would return to practice on Dec. 26 and that the league planned to resume its schedule on Monday, Dec. 27.</p>

The suspensions mean that 31 planned hockey games will not be played this week, though Dallas beat Minnesota on Monday night and two games scheduled for Tuesday — Washington at Philadelphia and Tampa Bay at Las Vegas — will still go ahead.

Several major sports leagues have already [postponed games individually and adjusted policies](#) as they struggle to keep their seasons going amid the spread of the highly contagious Omicron variant. The N.H.L., which is considering whether to send players to the Winter Olympics in Beijing in February, on Sunday suspended travel between the United States and Canada for games, citing “the fluid nature of federal travel restrictions.” About 15 percent of the league’s 700-plus players were restricted by coronavirus protocols, [The Associated Press reported](#) on Monday.

The move by hockey’s leaders came as the National Football League was still completing a slate of games that had been scheduled for the weekend.

The N.F.L. and its players’ union also made changes to their testing protocols on Saturday for the fourth time in a week. Vaccinated N.F.L. players who don’t show symptoms will receive “strategic and targeted” tests and players showing signs of Covid-19 will be tested “promptly.” More than 40 N.F.L. players were added to the Covid-19 reserve list on Monday, meaning they had either tested positive or were deemed to have been in close contact with someone else who had.

On Sunday, the N.B.A. announced that it would postpone five games. Its players will be tested daily for two weeks starting Dec. 26.

England’s Premier League canceled nearly all of its soccer matches over the weekend because rosters were widely depleted by positive cases. The league remained resolute, saying [in a statement](#) that it would keep its schedule “where safely possible,” even as clubs were told to return to their 2020 coronavirus protocols and players were urged to limit social contacts.

College football’s four-team playoff begins in less than two weeks, with its championship game set for Jan. 10. Bill Hancock, the executive director of the College Football Playoff, [said last week](#) that no changes had been made to the schedule and that the four playoff teams were still set to arrive at their venues. The semifinals are scheduled for Dec. 31 near Miami and Dallas, and the championship game for Jan. 10 in Indianapolis.

Some N.H.L. players, though eager to play in the Olympics for the first time since 2014, have [expressed misgivings about the burdens of testing protocols and other rules](#) at the Beijing Games.

“I’m very disappointed and it tough decision for me as it’s once in life time opportunity,” Robin Lehner, the goalie for the Vegas Golden Knights, [said on Twitter](#). He had been hoping to play for Sweden.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Omicron surge, restrictions in Northeast
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/20/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#omicron-drives-a-surge-and-more-restrictions-in-the-northeast
GIST	<p>The extremely contagious Omicron variant is now the dominant version of new coronavirus cases in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and has prompted the resumption of mask mandates in some cities and states in the Northeast, where the growth in new cases has been particularly steep.</p> <p>Omicron, first discovered overseas around Thanksgiving and identified in the U.S. on Dec. 1, now accounts for more than 70 percent of new U.S. cases, according to federal estimates released Monday.</p> <p>The estimates underscored the rapid spread of the new variant. Two weeks ago, the C.D.C. said Omicron accounted for just 1 percent of U.S. cases; a week ago, it was about 13 percent. Delta, which for months</p>

had been the dominant form of the virus, accounted for about 26 percent of new cases over the last week, the C.D.C. estimated.

Omicron, discovered thanks to its distinctive combination of more than 50 mutations, has turned out to be highly transmissible — two to three times as likely to spread as Delta — and less susceptible to vaccines than other variants. Early cases raised hopes that it may cause milder disease than other variants, but scientists say more research is needed.

In New York, new cases have shot up more than 80 percent over two weeks. In Washington, D.C., where the mayor reinstated an indoor mask mandate on Monday, more than three times as many cases are being identified each day as at the start of December.

In Boston, where cases are also surging, Mayor Michelle Wu on Monday announced proof-of-vaccination requirements for certain indoor spaces like gyms and restaurants.

In a news conference on Monday, Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York City said that the city must “move faster” in its response to the latest wave of new cases, but insisted that another lockdown “would have horrible impacts on the people of this city.”

New York’s governor, Kathy Hochul, on Monday called the surge in new cases “a vertical increase” because “it is going straight up,” but she did not announce new restrictions. Ms. Hochul, a Democrat, appeared at her daily coronavirus briefing without the state’s health commissioner, Dr. Mary T. Bassett, who tested positive for coronavirus via a rapid test earlier in the day.

The tens of thousands of new cases in recent days have included prominent politicians and lawmakers, such as Larry Hogan, the governor of Maryland, and Senators Cory Booker of New Jersey and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts.

The surge is coming as many hospitals have reached capacity and governors in several states have mobilized the National Guard to help with hospital staffing shortages. As Covid-19 cases crowd into hospitals, leaders of health care facilities in multiple states have taken out newspaper ads begging local residents to get vaccinated.

“We need your help,” pleaded the leaders of several health care facilities in Ohio in a full-page ad in Sunday’s edition of the Cleveland Plain-Dealer. “We now have more Covid-19 patients in our hospitals than ever before.”

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, the situation has varied around the country, though the overall picture is growing worse by the day.

Some states are still struggling with the Delta variant, which had ravaged the South over the summer, while the Omicron variant seems to be driving the surge in the Northeast. Vaccinated people without booster shots are believed to be more vulnerable to infection by Omicron.

The six New England states — Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont — have some of the highest vaccination rates in the country, but are nonetheless seeing a worrisome new spike in coronavirus cases.

Nearly 11,000 people in the New England states are now testing positive for coronavirus every day, according to a New York Times coronavirus tracker. Almost all of these states have also seen an uptick in the number of hospitalizations and deaths over the past two weeks.

Rhode Island, with one of the highest vaccination rates in the country, with 75 percent of people fully vaccinated, is also now the U.S. state with the highest recent average cases per capita, according to the database. Daily cases have increased more than 50 percent over the last two weeks.

	<p>In response, Gov. Dan McKee announced that indoor establishments will now require masks or proof of vaccination, starting on Monday. The state is also adding more vaccine test sites for people ahead of the holidays.</p> <p>“Now is the time to act,” Mr. McKee said at a Dec. 15 news conference, after describing the current pressure on the state’s hospitals, health care industry and schools. “It is not a time to just sit and wait.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 European leaders weigh tougher measures
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/20/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#european-leaders-weigh-tougher-measures-as-the-omicron-surge-threatens-health-systems
GIST	<p>Five days before a Christmas that many hoped would mark a return to normal, governments across Europe were instead considering new social restrictions and tougher rules to protect their health systems from another potentially devastating coronavirus wave.</p> <p>In Britain, where new infections driven by the fast-spreading Omicron variant have reached their highest levels of the pandemic, Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Monday described an “extremely difficult” surge of hospitalizations in London and said he was “looking at all kinds of things to keep Omicron under control.”</p> <p>In Germany, where experts warned that more health workers are testing positive and I.C.U.s and emergency rooms are reaching capacity, government leaders were scheduled to meet on Tuesday to discuss imposing stricter curbs on gatherings before New Year’s Eve.</p> <p>“We should be careful about ruling anything out,” Hendrik Wüst, the premier of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany’s most populous state, told the broadcaster ARD, adding: “The big New Year’s Eve parties won’t be able to take place this year.”</p> <p>The rapid surge of Omicron, less than a month after it was first identified, has confronted European nations with the prospect of a second consecutive Christmas clouded by lockdown-like measures, travel bans and fears of rationed health care. Governments are rapidly accelerating booster shots as the scientific evidence accumulates that two vaccine doses are insufficient to stop infections.</p> <p>Even though researchers still don’t know whether Omicron causes severe illness in most people, its rapid spread in Britain and Denmark — two countries with high vaccination rates and high levels of disease surveillance — has alarmed the continent.</p> <p>Researchers in Denmark, where nearly 77 percent of people have had two vaccine doses, found last week that Omicron cases were doubling every two days, and that the variant was mostly infecting people who had been fully vaccinated. The tiny Scandinavian nation is now recording more than 9,000 new cases daily, one of the highest per-person infection rates in the world.</p> <p>In Britain, the variant has become the dominant strain of the virus in London, where experts say cases are doubling every two days.</p> <p>In London hospitals, the number of Covid patients rose by 30 percent last week, according to Chris Hopson, the chief of N.H.S. Providers, the membership organization for England’s National Health Service staff. Infections were also cutting into the number of health care providers; staff absences attributed to Covid-19 more than doubled last week, he added, forcing some health facilities to “postpone nonessential activity.”</p> <p>Concerns over the effect on health systems are part of the reason that the Netherlands over the weekend announced a lockdown, even though the country’s new case totals have fallen from their late November peak, when most cases were of the Delta variant. On Saturday, Prime Minister Mark Rutte ordered the</p>

closure of all but essential businesses until the second week of January and limited the number of guests allowed into people's homes.

Acknowledging that the measures meant "another Christmas that is completely different from what we would like," Mr. Rutte said that the lockdown was necessary to prevent "an unmanageable situation in hospitals."

The Netherlands has less I.C.U. capacity than many wealthy European nations, with 6.7 beds per 100,000 people, compared with 19 in France and 14 in the United States, according to the [Our World in Data Project at the University of Oxford](#). Officials say that occupancy rates at hospitals are already high, and experts warn that nurses are being stretched thin.

"The burnout is huge," said Dr. Mark Seubert, a critical-care physician in the Netherlands. "You see more people leaving the health care sector than joining it."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Europe: crackdown or wait-and-see?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/world/europe/europe-divided-omicron-response.html
GIST	<p>PARIS — The Dutch can now invite only two guests to their homes as part of a new lockdown. In Denmark, where masks and other social restrictions had all but disappeared thanks to a successful vaccination campaign, cinemas, amusement parks, zoos and other establishments are closed once again.</p> <p>By contrast, France has ruled out lockdowns, curfews or closures on a continent where new Covid-19 rules are being announced every day in the face of the Omicron variant's rapid spread. "The French exception," the front page of one newspaper, Le Parisien, said on Monday.</p> <p>For now, France — as well as Spain and, to a lesser extent, Italy — is betting that high vaccine and booster coverage, along with earlier restrictions it put in place, will be enough to keep the coronavirus variant manageable, adopting a wait-and-see attitude as a sense of urgency grips the Netherlands, Denmark and Britain.</p> <p>The numbers show why.</p> <p>In London, the number of Covid cases rose by 30 percent last week, and the mayor declared a "major incident" — an emergency status that frees up resources. Denmark is now recording more than 9,000 new cases daily, one of the highest infection rates in the world. And the Netherlands became the first country in Europe to return to a full lockdown amid fears that its relatively low number of I.C.U. beds would be overwhelmed.</p> <p>Spain, Italy and France all have lower Covid cases per 100,000 people than some of their northern neighbors, at least for now.</p> <p>Antoine Flahault, director of the Institute of Global Health in Geneva, said that countries in northern Europe had "tended to be more proactive, in moving quickly in not wanting their hospitals to be overwhelmed." For countries in the south, he said, restrictions and lockdowns are "always an act of last resort."</p> <p>In all the countries, economic and political concerns — just days before Christmas — are also guiding governments, amid uncertainty about just how big a risk the variant poses. Epidemiologists have warned that even if Omicron is eventually shown to cause less severe illness, its rapid spread could still send huge numbers of people to hospitals.</p> <p>The warnings recall some of the most uncertain moments early in the pandemic, with surging case numbers leaving European nations with the prospect of a second consecutive Christmas clouded by lockdown-like measures, travel bans and fears of rationed health care.</p>

Governments are accelerating booster shots as the scientific evidence accumulates that two vaccine doses are insufficient to stop infection, though the vaccines appear to reduce the risk of hospitalization and serious illness. The United States is carefully watching Britain and Denmark for clues of what might happen at home, since both countries are good at tracking variants.

In France, the government said that Omicron was now estimated to have caused hundreds of cases, and that it would be the dominant variant by early next month. An average of 52,471 coronavirus cases per day were reported in France in the last week, according to a New York Times database, up 23 percent from the average two weeks ago.

The government of President Emmanuel Macron has encouraged vaccinations by issuing health passes to people who receive shots, and has managed to keep schools and most establishments open. More than 70 percent of the French population has received two doses, though some six million have yet to receive a single shot.

Fresh restrictions would chip away at that success just four months before presidential elections.

The government is focused on tightening restrictions on unvaccinated people in the new year by making France's health pass contingent on getting vaccinated. Currently, people can also obtain a pass with a recent negative Covid test.

The government has also shortened the wait before people can receive a booster shot to four months, from five. So far, about 17.5 million people have had boosters, or about 36 percent of the population that had received two doses.

"It's annoying, but this year there's at least more of a Christmas spirit than last year, when we had a curfew," said Sherryline Ramos, a student in communications who was strolling with a friend along the Champs-Élysées in Paris. "We couldn't go out and enjoy Christmas decorations."

In Spain, there has also been little appetite to return to the restrictions that became common during previous waves of the virus. Such a move, ahead of the Christmas holiday, is considered both politically and economically treacherous.

Last week, officials raised the country's alert level, and they now report 50 infections per 100,000 people, the steepest rate in months. But on Monday, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez signaled a wait-and-see approach, noting that hospitalizations remained lower than elsewhere in Europe and that the vaccines appeared to be doing their job.

"With notably higher contagion figures, we have lower hospitalization and intensive care occupation than a year ago," he said. "The first conclusion is that vaccination works and that this health crisis can only be stopped by science."

Medical experts agree that Spain's high vaccination rates have set it apart from other European countries. More than 80 percent of the country is fully vaccinated.

But some in the public health community expressed reservations about the government's current approach. Rafael Vilasanjuan, the policy director of ISGlobal, a public health think tank in Barcelona, said that as countries in northern Europe move urgently to try to slow the variant, Spain could be losing valuable time in getting ahead of it.

"We're not in the situation where we can think the vaccine is enough," he said. "We can eventually be in the same situation as others with hospitalizations."

Mr. Vilasanjuan said the country should be considering a number of measures that other nations have adopted, including instituting a national vaccine passport and more forcefully pushing citizens to avoid large meetings, even during the holidays. He noted that while Omicron numbers had not surged yet to the

levels seen in some other countries, they had risen in cities like Barcelona, where they now account for nearly a third of P.C.R. tests in some hospitals.

José Martínez Olmos, a former Spanish health official who works now as a professor at the Andalusian School of Public Health in Granada, said that voluntary measures might not be enough in the long term. He said the government might soon need to impose new restrictions on public activities, like limiting capacity in restaurants, hotels and theaters, and reducing their hours of operation.

And, as hard as it might be to enforce in Spain, the government needs to encourage limits on Christmas activities, Mr. Olmos said. “They need to recommend that people going to Christmas dinners try to be inside as little as possible, because social interactions are the key risk,” he said.

In Italy, the government is considering imposing new measures amid concerns over Omicron, but Prime Minister Mario Draghi said on Monday that a final decision had not been made.

The government has made the vaccination campaign a national priority.

In October, Italy became the first major European country to require a “Green Pass” for all workers. Since then it has continued to tighten restrictions for the unvaccinated. As of last week, people traveling to Italy from other European countries must show recent negative rapid tests and proof of vaccination or recovery, or else they may be quarantined.

Omicron’s rapid spread — especially in Britain and Denmark, two countries with high vaccination rates — has alarmed many experts.

Denmark lifted all social restrictions in early September after a successful vaccination campaign. But last week, in addition to closing a host of public venues, the government banned the serving of alcohol from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. and required a valid vaccine passport for travel aboard intercity buses and trains.

In the Netherlands, concerns over Omicron’s effects on the health care system pushed the government over the weekend to order the closure of all but essential businesses until the second week of January. The number of guests allowed into people’s homes was limited to two, though four will be allowed on Christmas and New Year’s Eve.

Michel de Blaeij, 33, who lives in Terneuzen, a city in the south of the Netherlands, said he supported the measures, but he was critical of what he considers the government’s lack of clarity and consistency. The government’s decision to send schoolchildren home on Christmas vacation a week early had left many parents scrambling, he said.

“You just don’t know where you stand,” he said, adding, “The general mood is frustration right now.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Pentagon roots out extremism in military
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/us/politics/pentagon-military-extremism-rules.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The Pentagon on Monday issued new guidelines meant to root out extremism in the U.S. military, warning that “liking” white nationalist and extremist content on social media and similar activities could result in disciplinary action.</p> <p>The guidelines come nearly a year after the Capitol attack on Jan. 6, which dozens of current and former service members attended, leading to a reckoning at the Pentagon over extremism in the ranks.</p> <p>The participation of military personnel in the Capitol riot distressed senior Pentagon officials so much that Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III ordered a 60-day “stand down,” completed in April, to address the issue. During that period, most units in the armed forces discussed why white supremacy and extremism have no place in the military.</p>

In those conversations, one young service member said that for the first four months after he joined his Army unit, a [flag](#) representing the right-wing extremist militia called the [Three Percenters](#) hung on a wall in the foyer of his barracks. A Black Marine described feeling sick when he saw the red and gold flag that represents his service being flown during the Capitol attack. A white brigadier general worried privately about whether service members could be in trouble for supporting former President Donald J. Trump.

After the stand down, Mr. Austin set up a working group to examine how to better vet recruits and educate service members who may be targeted by extremist organizations. The group then submitted recommendations, which Defense Department officials said they hoped would enable commanders to better root out extremism.

John F. Kirby, the Pentagon's chief spokesman, said officials discovered that about 100 service members were involved in substantiated cases of extremist activity over the past year.

In a memo to the department on Monday, Mr. Austin said the Pentagon was updating its screening of recruits and would also look at how to prepare troops who are retiring from being targeted by extremist organizations after leaving the military.

"The overwhelming majority of the men and women of the Department of Defense serve this country with honor and integrity," Mr. Austin said in the memo. "They respect the oath they took to support and defend the Constitution of the United States."

He added, "We believe only a very few violate this oath by participating in extremist activities, but even the actions of a few can have an outsized impact on unit cohesion, morale and readiness, and the physical harm some of these activities can engender can undermine the safety of our people."

Guidelines on social media usage are among the most significant changes being put into place. Reposting or "liking" extremist content will be viewed as advocating the content, Mr. Kirby said.

Still, he added that the Defense Department would not be scrolling through Facebook accounts looking for trouble.

"There's no methodology in there," Mr. Kirby said. "There's no ability for the Department of Defense to monitor the personal social media accounts of every member of the armed forces." Rather, he said, when problems come to light through "various streams of reporting," commanders would be expected to talk to their troops to determine whether further steps were needed.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/21 Thailand reinstates mandatory quarantine
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thailand-reinstates-mandatory-covid-19-quarantine-scraps-waiver-programme-2021-12-21/
GIST	<p>Dec 21 (Reuters) - Thailand will reinstate its mandatory COVID-19 quarantine for foreign visitors and scrap a quarantine waiver from Tuesday due to concerns over the spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus.</p> <p>The decision to halt Thailand's "Test and Go" waiver means visitors will have to undergo hotel quarantine, which ranges between 7 to 10 days.</p> <p>Meanwhile, a so-called "sandbox" programme, which requires visitors to remain in a specific location but allows them free movement outside of their accommodation, will also be suspended in all places except for the tourist resort island of Phuket.</p> <p>"After Dec. 21, there will be no new registrations for 'Test and Go', only quarantine or Phuket sandbox," said deputy government spokeswoman Rachada Dhanadirek.</p>

	<p>The announcement came a day after Thailand reported the first case of local transmission of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>It also came weeks after Thailand reopened to foreign visitors in November, ending nearly 18 months of strict entry policies that contributed to a collapse in tourism, a key industry and economic driver that drew 40 million visitors in 2019.</p> <p>About 200,000 visitors who had previously registered for the quarantine waiver and sandbox programme will still be eligible, said government spokesman Thanakorn Wangboonkongchana.</p> <p>"This is not to shut off tourists but to temporarily suspend arrivals," he said.</p> <p>The decision will be reviewed on Jan. 4, he added.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/21 Israel's role in Iran Quds general killing
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-iran-jerusalem-israel-military-intelligence-cfba78c69ae656697684ab92c4cac5b9
GIST	<p>JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's former military intelligence chief says the country was involved in the American airstrike that killed Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. It was the first public acknowledgement of Israel's role in the operation.</p> <p>Soleimani headed the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's elite Quds Force and helped orchestrate Iran's involvement with paramilitary groups abroad. He was killed in a U.S. drone strike at the Baghdad airport in January 2020, an incident that threatened to pull the countries into full-blown conflict.</p> <p>A week after the airstrike, NBC News reported that Israeli intelligence helped confirm the details of Soleimani's flight from Damascus to Baghdad. Earlier this year, a Yahoo News reported that Israel "had access to Soleimani's numbers" and gave that intelligence to the United States.</p> <p>But Maj. Gen. Tamir Heyman, the now-retired general who headed military intelligence until October, appears to be the first official to confirm Israel's involvement.</p> <p>Heyman's comments were published in the November issue of a Hebrew-language magazine closely affiliated with Israel's intelligence services. The interview was held in late September, a couple weeks before his retirement from the military. The authors wrote that Heyman opened the interview by talking about the American airstrike that killed Soleimani, but in which Israeli intelligence played a part.</p> <p>"Assassinating Soleimani was an achievement, since our main enemy, in my eyes, are the Iranians," Heyman told the magazine. He said there were "two significant and important assassinations during my term" as head of army intelligence.</p> <p>"The first, as I've already recalled, is that of Qassem Soleimani -- it's rare to locate someone so senior, who is the architect of the fighting force, the strategist and the operator -- it's rare," he said. Heyman called Soleimani "the engine of the train of Iranian entrenchment" in neighboring Syria.</p> <p>Israel has carried out hundreds of airstrikes in Syria in the past decade, but rarely publicly comments on them. Israel has said, however, that it has targeted bases of Iranian-backed force and arms shipments bound for Iran's proxy, the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah.</p> <p>Heyman said that Israeli strikes had succeeded in "preventing the attempt by Iran to put down roots in Syria."</p> <p>The Israeli military did not immediately respond to requests for comment on Heyman's remarks.</p>

	<p>The interview was published as world powers and Iran were engaged in negotiations to reach a new agreement to curb Iran’s nuclear program. The previous deal, struck in 2015, unraveled after the United States unilaterally withdrew in 2018 and re-imposed crippling economic sanctions on Iran.</p> <p>On Wednesday, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan was scheduled to meet this week in Jerusalem with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett to discuss “a range of issues of strategic importance to the U.S.-Israel bilateral relationship, including the threat posed by Iran,” National Security Council Spokesperson Emily Horne said.</p> <p>Israel considers Iran its regional arch-foe, and says it will take any steps needed to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Iran insists its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 NWS: Dec. 15 storms classified as derecho
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/tornadoes-storms-weather-thunderstorms-875be12287cf9b8e0396b0cebd493bdf
GIST	<p>O’FALLON, Mo. (AP) — A line of severe thunderstorms and tornadoes that swept across the north-central U.S. last week was the result of a serial derecho — the first on record in December, officials with the National Weather Service said Monday.</p> <p>At least 45 tornadoes have been preliminarily confirmed in the Dec. 15 storms that crossed the Great Plains and Midwest amid unseasonably warm temperatures, said Bill Bunting, chief of forecast operations at the weather service’s Storm Prediction Center. Nebraska, Iowa and Minnesota took the brunt of the damage.</p> <p>Bunting said at least 12 of the tornadoes were rated EF-2. Many of the thunderstorms also carried winds of up to 80 mph (129 kph). Five deaths were blamed on the weather.</p> <p>Bunting said that normally in December, air from the Gulf of Mexico has cooled, and colder air is present in the upper Midwest — factors that reduce the risk of severe thunderstorms and tornadoes. But this year, “we haven’t had much of a winter,” he said.</p> <p>“So you had a very strong storm system with really somewhat unprecedented access to very warm, humid air that flows northward, and those are the ingredients that you look for for severe thunderstorms,” Bunting said. “The result was quite remarkable for December.”</p> <p>A derecho is often described as an inland hurricane. But, it has no eye and its winds come across in a line. The similarity is in the damage, which is likely to spread over a wide area, unlike a tornado where the damage is more spotty.</p> <p>The weather service said a wind damage swath extending more than 240 miles (386 kilometers) with wind gusts of at least 58 mph (93 kilometers per hour) along most of its length can be classified as a derecho.</p> <p>A derecho was also declared in August 2020 when storms packing 100 mph (161 kph) winds lasted several hours and caused damage from eastern Nebraska, across Iowa and into parts of Wisconsin and Illinois.</p> <p>There was a difference: The August 2020 storm was a progressive derecho, while last week’s was a serial derecho.</p> <p>The weather service said a progressive derecho is fueled by a hot and moist environment with relatively strong winds aloft. Serial derechos are produced by storms with strong winds that bow outward, the service said. They sweep across an area both long and wide, driven by the presence of very strong winds in the atmosphere.</p>

	The unprecedented December warm spell included temperatures that rose to 70 degrees Fahrenheit (21 degrees Celsius) as far north as Wisconsin, creating evening temperatures that weather historian Chris Burt compared to that of a “warm July evening.”
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 ‘Scary’ 6.2mag quake northern Calif. coast
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/weather/topstories/scary-62-earthquake-strikes-area-near-eureka-in-northern-california/ar-AAS0fGO?ocid=uxbndlbing
GIST	<p>The quake was reported at about 12:10 p.m. off the Pacific coast near Petrolia, a town south of Eureka in Humboldt County, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.</p> <p>The National Weather Service on Twitter said no tsunami was expected from the temblor.</p> <p>Jane Dexter, a manager at the Petrolia General Store, described the jolt as “big” and “scary.”</p> <p>She said wine and soap bottles fell off shelves and burst on the floor. There weren’t many customers inside during the earthquake, and no one was injured, she said.</p> <p>“It just started to rumble and rumble harder and harder for probably 20 seconds,” said Dexter. “The doors to the firehouse (next door) were shaking violently.</p> <p>“It was bigger than (anything) I’ve felt in a long time out here,” she added.</p> <p>In Ferndale, between Eureka and Petrolia, several storefront windows were shattered along Main Street. Food and soda bottles fell on the floor of an aisle at a grocery store.</p> <p>Some people on Twitter said they felt the earthquake in San Francisco and other parts of the Bay Area, more than 200 miles south of Petrolia.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 Rally exhausted Americans against omicron
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/biden-will-try-to-rally-exhausted-americans-against-omicron-threat/ar-AAS0gQO?ocid=uxbndlbing
GIST	<p>Four days before Christmas, as coronavirus cases spike and testing lines snake around city blocks, President Biden on Tuesday will again attempt to persuade Americans to take protections to fend off the fast-spreading omicron variant.</p> <p>But at a moment of great urgency — both for the nation’s health and the president’s standing — he has few new tools at his disposal, at least not politically palatable ones, and public health experts fear that exhausted Americans have tuned out their warnings.</p> <p>Biden, who campaigned on a platform that some of the ravages of last year’s pandemic were preventable, is now faced with the challenge of explaining that omicron infections may be near-inevitable even in the vaccinated. The fast-moving variant accounted for nearly three-quarters of coronavirus cases in the past week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Monday. That astonishing advance has left some administration officials and experts frustrated with the government’s stay-the-course messaging, as well as its inability to ramp up the supply of rapid tests quickly enough to address demand.</p> <p>Biden on Tuesday will strike a more dire tone than his earlier pleas to get vaccinated, having emphasized last week that unvaccinated Americans are facing “a winter of severe illness and death.” But White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Monday that the president’s speech is not “about locking the country down.”</p> <p>Instead, he will announce a plan to set up testing sites across the country, partly modeled on the Federal Emergency Management Agency-run vaccination sites the administration deployed during its vaccination</p>

campaign, according to people familiar with the plans, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss them. The president will also detail steps to bolster the capacity of hospitals, many of which are expected to be inundated in coming weeks.

But Tuesday's planned remarks and actions come "too late" for many Americans trying to navigate the new risks of omicron and make holiday plans, warned William Hanage, an epidemiologist at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

"It has been very very strange watching the storm clouds gather ... and for the preeminent body dealing with public health to have been so quiet," Hanage added in an email, faulting Biden and the CDC for not offering new guidance on gatherings and quarantines after omicron's emergence last month.

New confirmed infections in the United States have roughly doubled since early November, rising from about 74,000 cases on Nov. 8 to about 147,000 cases on Dec. 20, according to The Washington Post's rolling seven-day average.

The outbreak has been fueled by the rapid growth of the omicron variant, with cases multiplying at an unprecedented rate, as well as tens of thousands of infections linked to the older delta variant.

Hospitalizations have also increased by nearly 50 percent since early November, rising from fewer than 47,000 on Nov. 8 to more than 68,000 now, driven by the delta variant.

While many people experience only mild symptoms from omicron, and vaccine boosters appear to protect against severe illness, administration officials and allies are bracing for the new cases to swamp hospitals and health centers, many of which are already struggling with a siege of delta cases.

"It's going to be a surge like we haven't seen before, numbers that are completely out of control," former White House adviser Andy Slavitt said on MSNBC on Monday.

In his speech, Biden is expected to emphasize that while fully vaccinated Americans who have received booster shots may still get infected by the more transmissible variant, they are likely to experience mild symptoms — a sharp change from earlier this year, when the administration [said](#) breakthrough infections were rare and the country was on the precipice of declaring freedom from the virus. A spate of such infections have been [reported](#) in recent days among public officials, including Sens. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) and Cory Booker (D-N.J.), and Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan (R).

The White House also announced Monday evening that a "mid-level staffer" had a breakthrough infection, three days after the staffer spent 30 minutes in proximity to Biden on Friday. The president tested negative on Monday and will be tested again on Wednesday, the White House said.

Biden also is set to tout efforts to broaden access to coronavirus tests, said people with knowledge of the remarks. The administration has struggled to explain testing shortages to Americans, including Psaki's widely criticized remark earlier this month. "Should we just send one to every American?" she said, when pressed why the administration has not made the at-home tests free and more widely available.

The president's plan will focus on "ensuring that the health system has the supports and the resources that it needs to withstand and respond to a notable uptick in patients," said a senior health official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to preview the remarks.

Biden's speech comes three weeks after he [unveiled his initial plan](#) to combat a winter surge, and administration officials say that they have rapidly mobilized to deal with the emerging omicron threat. For instance, the CDC organized a daily omicron-focused conference call with more than 250 health officials and leaders around the country, and set up a cross-state team to investigate an early outbreak at a New York City anime convention, said Ian Sams, a spokesperson for the Department of Health and Human Services.

But as the omicron wave bears down on America, public health experts say officials must focus on three things: persuading more Americans to get shots and wear masks, and making more tests available.

“We need to hear a clear strategy for ... what’s going to be a really bumpy few months,” said Jason Schwartz, an associate professor of health policy at the Yale School of Public Health. “I’m skeptical about how much another presidential address, fact sheets and memorandums can really do.”

In Europe, many nations have reinstated restrictions in the last week or two to combat omicron, even as those measures upend Christmas and New Year’s plans. The Netherlands began a so-called “snap lockdown” on Sunday afternoon, shuttering nonessential stores, bars and restaurants until mid-January. Ireland adopted an 8 p.m. curfew, France closed nightclubs and banned New Year’s fireworks, and Germany barred unvaccinated people from entering nonessential stores.

Celine Gounder, an epidemiologist who advised Biden’s transition team on the pandemic response, said it’s critical that the president reframes how Americans understand the pandemic. Although cases are skyrocketing, she said that early evidence suggests vaccinated Americans who contract the virus are generally not becoming seriously ill.

“Refocusing on hospitalizations and deaths is really important in terms of a strategic shift,” she said, adding that doing so would make clearer “all the things we need to be doing and where to emphasize, where to prioritize.”

Gounder, who remains in touch with administration officials, said there are other policy measures the president could announce, including additional steps to invoke the Defense Production Act to expand testing, urging schools and business to improve ventilation and air filtration systems, and reimposing mask mandates. But ultimately, she said the push for more vaccinations is the most critical.

“That is the fast forward button on the pandemic,” she said. “That is how we rip off the Band-Aid and minimize the pain. I think that needs to be front and center.”

Inside the administration, health officials are collecting data on the severity of the omicron variant, compared to earlier lineages of the virus. But even if it turns out to be less severe, as officials hope, they warn hospitals are still likely to be overwhelmed because of the sheer number of cases, which will mean that a certain percentage of those will become severe.

Administration officials also say they are running out of tactics to encourage holdouts to take protective steps, having tried [social media campaigns](#), vaccination lotteries and other efforts to raise awareness. While vaccinations and boosters appear to defang the most severe consequences of omicron, tens of millions of Americans continue to balk and getting vaccinated and fewer than [one-third of fully vaccinated people](#) have received booster shots.

Testing, meanwhile, can help identify and contain outbreaks, but rapid tests are in short supply and long lines are forming at test centers around the country. And while masks have been shown to reduce viral transmission, and the CDC has urged more than 90 percent of counties to require masks indoors, only a handful of states and cities, such as California, New York and Washington, D.C., have so far reinstated mandates.

“The government can only solve so much,” said a senior health official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the government’s response. “If people don’t agree on the same set of facts — it’s hard to get people to do the things that we know will work.”

Public health experts counter that the White House could do more to inform the public. Yale’s Schwartz said he’s frustrated that administration officials have sidestepped questions at news conferences, such as whether the definition of “fully vaccinated” should be updated to reflect that many Americans have yet to obtain recommended boosters.

“It’s fair, I think, to ask our health officials to help explain why they land at a certain point ... and what they’re keeping in mind as they think about changing it,” Schwartz said. “And that gets lost with this ritual refrain about ‘following the science, and it’s evolving.’ What frustrates me is I hear that invoked more and more frequently.”

White House officials have spent three weeks intensely sifting through data about omicron, seeking to understand the new variant without alarming Americans until more was known.

In a series of meetings in late November and early December, senior health officials were briefed on findings from South Africa that showed dramatic declines in protection from a two-dose regimen of Pfizer’s coronavirus vaccine, about two weeks before [similar data was published](#) last week, said two people with knowledge of the briefings.

White House officials cautioned the data drew on a limited study and said it would have been premature to share it before more was known. The findings align with a study released last week by Discovery Health, South Africa’s [largest health insurer](#), which also concluded that omicron appears to cause less severe illness than prior virus variants.

Omicron poses only the latest messaging challenge in a series of such difficulties related to an evolving virus and science.

As a candidate, Biden blamed former president Donald Trump for mismanaging a pandemic that he called preventable. “If the president had done his job, had done his job from the beginning, all the people would still be alive,” Biden said at a town hall in September 2020.

Experts said the White House has also struggled to communicate why cases have continued to rise as new variants emerge. In a Los Angeles Times interview last week, Vice President Harris said “we didn’t see delta coming ... we didn’t see omicron coming,” a statement the White House walked back amid criticism from public health experts that they had consistently warned about mutated forms of the virus.

Bruce Haynes, a crisis communications expert at Sard Verbinen & Co., said that Biden’s team had repeated some of their predecessors’ messaging mistakes, such as failing to share “simple, easy-to-understand messages that don’t challenge the broader public.”

For instance, Biden officials in May advised that masks were no longer necessary in many cases, with the president calling it a “[great day](#)” in a Rose Garden news conference — only to [reinstate mask guidelines](#) less than three months later. This fall, the White House and some of its top scientific officials publicly split over the need for widespread booster shots, with senior Food and Drug Administration officials and CDC advisers bristling at Biden’s eagerness to roll out a national booster campaign. The result was a [muddled message](#) that scientific experts blamed for hindering the takeup of boosters, which have been shown to shore up waning immunity and provide key protection against omicron.

“There are always three things that you look for in crisis communications — and a pandemic is the very definition of crisis communications — and that’s clarity, consistency and credibility,” Haynes said. “I think both administrations have struggled to do that.”

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Recall: Procter & Gamble haircare products
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/20/business/procter-and-gamble-dry-shampoo-recall/index.html
GIST	New York (CNN Business)Procter & Gamble has recalled more than 30 aerosol spray haircare products, including many dry shampoos and dry conditioners, warning that the products could contain benzene, a cancer-causing agent .

The affected items include assorted Pantene, Herbal Essences, Hair Food, Old Spice and Aussie products, according to Friday's recall notice, which is P&G's [second within a month](#). A [full list of recalled products is available on the company's website](#), including the production code numbers affected by the recall.

P&G said in a statement that the affected products likely will not expose people to levels of benzene high enough to cause health issues. However, the company noted it has not "received any reports of adverse events," but it's moving forward with the recall out of "an abundance of caution."

"Exposure to benzene can occur by inhalation, orally, and through the skin and it can result in cancers, including leukemia and blood cancer of the bone marrow and blood disorders which can be life-threatening," the recall notice said. Retailers have been told to remove the recalled products from shelves.

P&G ([PG](#)) wants people who purchased the affected products, which were sold in stores across the United States as well as online, to throw them away. The company is offering full refunds, and customers can fill out an online form or contact a hotline at 1-888-674-36319 Monday through Friday from 9 am to 6 pm ET.

The Food and Drug Administration has been alerted of this recall, [the agency said](#).

P&G added that no other products from those lines are in the "scope of this recall and such other products may continue to be used as intended, including those aerosol dry shampoo spray products with production code ranges different from those specifically communicated."

In November, P&G issued a similar recall for more than a dozen Old Spice and Secret-branded aerosol deodorants and sprays, warning that the products could contain also benzene. In July, Johnson & Johnson ([JNJ](#)) recalled [some spray-on Neutrogena and Aveeno](#) sunscreens after it detected low levels of the carcinogen in the products.

Here's the full list:

- Waterless Dry Conditioner Weightless Smooth (3.6 oz) with UPC 37000543954 with a production code in the range of 0002-0248 or 9298-9350.
- Waterless Dry Conditioner Instant Moisture (3.6 oz) with UPC 37000543831 with a production code in the range of 0009-0069 or 9297-9350.
- Waterless Dry Conditioner Weightless Smooth (.98 oz) with UPC 37000544111 with a production code in the range of 0084-0085 or 9284-9361.
- Waterless Dry Conditioner Instant Moisture (.98 oz) with UPC 37000544227 with a production code in the range of 0017-0100 or 9283-9284.
- Waterless Dry Shampoo No Residue (3.7 oz) with UPC 37000543787 with a production code in the range of 0004-0357 or 9291-9344.
- Waterless Dry Shampoo No Residue (1 oz) with UPC 37000543978 with a production code in the range of 0175-0176 or 9295-9297.
- Pantene Sultry Bronde All in One Luxury Mist (4.9 oz) with UPC 80878188710 with production code 0038.
- Pantene Smooth Talker Dry Conditioning Oil (3.9 oz) with UPC 80878192397 with a production code in the range of 0183-0365 or 1042-1046.
- Pantene Mist Behaving Dry Conditioning Mist (3.9 oz) with UPC 80878190898 with a production code in the range of 0048-0336 or 1008-1218 or 9247-9349.
- Pantene Mist Behaving Dry Conditioning Mist (3.9 oz) with UPC 80878188758 with a production code in the range of 9108-9303.
- Pantene Mist Behaving Dry Conditioning Mist (1 oz) with UPC 80878188765 with a production code in the range of 0107-0262 or 9112-9288.
- Pantene Gold Series Instant Nourishing Spray (4.9 oz) with UPC 80878188987 with a production code in the range of 0307 or 9263-9266.
- Aussie Smooth Vibes Dry Conditioner (4.9 oz) with UPC 381519187957 with production code 0021 or 1038 or in the range of 9294-9325.
- Aussie Petal Soft Dry Conditioner (4.9 oz) with UPC 381519187544 with a production code in the range of 9196-9246.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aussie Sleekend Warrior Dry Conditioner (4.9 oz) with UPC 381519187537 with a production code in the range of 0014-0062 or 9198-9349. • Herbal Essences Blue Ginger Refresh Dry Shampoo (4.9 oz) with UPC 190679001498 with a production code in the range of 9047-9072. • Herbal Essences White Grapefruit & Mint Dry Shampoo (4.9 oz) with UPC 190679000262 with a production code in the range of 0015-0314 or 1004-1019 or 9028-9348. • Herbal Essences White Strawberry & Sweet Mint Dry Shampoo (4.9 oz) with UPC 190679000255 with a production code in the range of 0167-0308 or 1105-1106 or 9049-9348. • Herbal Essences Cucumber & Green Tea Dry Shampoo (4.9 oz) with UPC 190679000248 with a production code 0093 or 1075 or in the range of 9029-9294. • Herbal Essences Cucumber & Green Tea Dry Shampoo (1.7 oz) with UPC 190679000330 with a production code in the range of 0036-0329 or 1019-1098 or 9023-9312. • Pantene Dry Shampoo No Water Refresh (4.9 oz) with UPC 80878177042 with a production code in the range of 9009-9058. • Pantene Dry Shampoo Sheer Volume (4.9 oz) with UPC 80878185276 with a production code in the range of 9025-9260. • Pantene Never Tell Dry Shampoo (4.2 oz) with UPC 80878188727 with a production code in the range of 0006-0364 or 1074-1133 or 9157-9329. • Aussie After Hours Dry Shampoo Texture Spray 4.9 oz) with UPC 381519187834 with a production code in the range of 0139-0140. • Aussie Tousle Hustle Dry Shampoo (4.9 oz) with UPC 381519187285 with a production code in the range of 0013-0300 or 1038 or 9189. • Aussie Bounce Back Dry Shampoo (4.9 oz) with UPC 381519187278 with a production code in the range of 0013-00357 or 1018-1123 or 9189-9345. • Aussie Clean Color Protect Shampoo (4.9 oz) with UPC 381519187360 with a production code in the range of 9047-9123. • Aussie Clean Texture Dry Shampoo (4.9 oz) with UPC 381519187285 with a production code in the range of 9072-9176. • Aussie Clean Volume Dry Shampoo (4.9 oz) with UPC 381519187278 with production code 9085. • Hair Food Coconut Dry Shampoo (4.9 oz) with UPC 37000876717 with a production code in the range of 0027-0192 or 9007. • Old Spice Fiji Dry Shampoo (4.9 oz) with UPC 37000779421 with a production code in the range of 9046-9228. • Old Spice Pure Sport Dry Shampoo (4.9 oz) with UPC 37000785170 with a production code in the range of 9040-9239.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 CDC adds 8 places to highest risk category
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/cdc-very-high-risk-travel-destinations-december-20/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN) — The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention added eight destinations to its highest-risk category for travel on Monday, including the world's No. 2 most-visited nation before the pandemic started.</p> <p>In its weekly update of Covid-19 travel advisories, the CDC advised against travel to tourist favorite Spain at this time. In 2019, Spain received more international visitors than nearly every other nation in the world, except France, according to figures from the UN's World Tourism Organization.</p> <p>The CDC also added seven more places -- spanning the Caribbean, Africa and the Middle East as well as Europe -- to its "Level 4: Covid-19 Very High" category. They are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bonaire • Chad • Finland • Gibraltar • Lebanon

- **Monaco**
- **San Marino**

The CDC places a destination at Level 4 when more than 500 cases per 100,000 residents are registered in the past 28 days.

Three tiny destinations in Europe -- Gibraltar, Monaco and San Marino -- provide a cautionary example about traveling to places without reliable statistics. They all shot up to Level 4 on Monday from the CDC's "unknown" risk category. Destinations are put there when there is a lack of reliable information coming from them to the CDC.

Spain, Finland and Lebanon all moved up from Level 3, which is considered "high risk." Spain's designation comes even as it boasts impressive vaccination stats. As of December 17, [more than 80% of the population](#) had been fully vaccinated.

The landlocked northern African nation of Chad had previously been at Level 1, the "low risk" category.

Surging cases, Omicron worries and travel bans

Travel to and across Europe is becoming increasingly hard for tourists, particularly those from the United Kingdom, where cases have skyrocketed. [France has placed a ban](#) on all nonessential visitors to and from the UK.

Several countries in Europe [have introduced new restrictions](#) over the past few days as the Covid-19 surge there continues.

The Netherlands [entered a strict lockdown](#) on Sunday, with nonessential shops, hospitality venues and cultural institutions closing.

Some Christmas markets in Europe [are still planning to operate](#), but others, including the Munich market, have been canceled.

Other nations on Level 4

Spain is hardly alone. Much of Europe is currently ranked at the highest travel risk. Other big travel names already at the CDC's Level 4 include:

- **France**
- **Germany**
- **Greece**
- **Italy**
- **United Kingdom**

And Europe isn't the only continent with popular tourist destinations on Level 4. Among the other places also considered at "very high" risk for travel are:

- **Belize**
- **Jordan**
- **Singapore**
- **South Africa**
- **Turkey**

In all, almost 90 countries were rated Level 4 as of December 20.

You can view the CDC's risk levels for global destinations on its [travel recommendations page](#).

Level 3 news

The Level 3 category -- which applies to destinations that have had between 100 and 500 cases per 100,000 residents in the past 28 days -- just saw two new additions on Monday:

- **Peru**
- **St. Vincent and the Grenadines**

The move was good for the Caribbean island-nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which had been at Level 4. However, it was bad news for South America's Peru, which had been at Level 2 since early October.

Level 2, Level 1 and unknowns

Destinations carrying the "Level 2: Covid-19 Moderate" designation have seen 50 to 99 Covid-19 cases per 100,000 residents in the past 28 days. It only saw one addition on Monday, that of **St. Pierre and Miquelon**. The tiny French territory off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada, previously had been at Level 1.

In the category of "Level 1: Covid-19 Low" destinations, fewer than 50 new cases per 100,000 residents have been logged over the past 28 days. It saw no new additions on Monday.

Finally, there are destinations, as cited above, for which the CDC has an "unknown" risk because of a lack of information. On Monday, it added four places to this category:

- **Falkland Islands**
- **French Guiana**
- **Moldova**
- **Sudan**

The CDC cautions even fully vaccinated travelers about venturing to destinations with no reliable statistics about the current Covid-19 situation.

In its [broader travel guidance](#), the CDC has recommended avoiding all international travel until you are fully vaccinated.

"Fully vaccinated travelers are less likely to get and spread Covid-19. However, international travel poses additional risks, and even fully vaccinated travelers might be at increased risk for getting and possibly spreading some Covid-19 variants," the agency said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Houston: first US omicron variant death
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/us/houston-reports-first-confirmed-death-in-the-united-states-from-omicron-variant-of-covid-19
GIST	<p>An unvaccinated man in his 50s with underlying health conditions is believed to have been the first American to die from the omicron variant of COVID-19. Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo confirmed on Monday that he became the first to die from omicron in the county.</p> <p>The death comes as omicron spreads rapidly throughout the United States, replacing delta as the dominant strain.</p> <p>Omicron accounted for 73.2% of new cases in the week that ended Dec. 18, up from just 12.6% the prior week, according to data released by the CDC on Monday.</p> <p>Omicron has been reported in nearly every state, and it accounts for about 90% of new cases in some areas of the country, such as New York, the Southeast, and the Pacific Northwest.</p> <p>The omicron variant was first discovered in South Africa less than a month ago and the World Health Organization declared it a "variant of concern" on Nov. 26.</p> <p>It's unclear if omicron will cause more or less severe illness, but the CDC says "it likely will spread more easily than" previous variants.</p>

Current vaccines are likely to protect against severe illness and death from omicron, but breakthrough infections are likely in people who are fully vaccinated, according to the CDC.

Booster shots may help fend off the new variant. Moderna announced Monday that a half-dose booster shot increased the level of neutralizing antibodies [by 37 fold](#). A full-dose booster caused an 83-fold increase in antibodies.

Cases have surged in recent weeks as the 7-day average was 132,659 on Sunday, up from a low in the fall of 64,161 on Oct. 24.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 NKorea: decade under Kim Jong Un
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/north-korea-kim-jong-un-10-years-under-new-dictator/
GIST	<p><i>Seoul</i> — As Kim Jong Un walked with the car carrying the coffin of his father, former North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il, the public displays of grief by mourners lining the funeral procession route would have reminded him that he had big shoes to fill.</p> <p>But a decade on, he's done it. Unforgettable pictures of the young Kim riding a horse up a sacred mountain, released by North Korea's government in 2019, depicted a man firmly in control not only of his steed, but of his country.</p> <p>Ryu Hun Woo was a senior North Korean diplomat until he defected from the isolated "Hermit Kingdom" two years ago. Speaking to CBS News Asia correspondent Elizabeth Palmer, Ryu said there was no ambiguity in North Korea about who was in charge.</p> <p>Kim has "absolute power," said the defector. "That's how he maintains the dictatorship."</p> <p>Kim Jong Un, as commander in chief of North Korea's armed forces, has amped-up the country's weapons program. On his watch, the North has tested four nuclear warheads, and in 2017, a missile capable of reaching the United States.</p> <p>His meetings with President Trump in 2018 and 2019 failed to kickstart negotiations on denuclearization in return for sanctions relief, and at the annual ruling party congress earlier this year, Kim said the U.S. remains North Korea's biggest enemy.</p> <p>But his other enemy is the coronavirus pandemic. Kim has sealed the country's borders for the second time in a bid to keep COVID-19 out, which means no trade, and no aid — not even donated vaccine doses.</p> <p>He isn't even letting in COVID vaccines made and supplied by his ally, China.</p> <p>Apart from a lack of syringes in the country, Ryu explains the drugs would be useless as there's no reliable electricity supply, to ensure they can be stored at the required low temperatures.</p> <p>However, it's not even clear they'd be needed. Kim claims there hasn't been a single case of COVID-19 in North Korea since the pandemic began. Unlikely as it sounds, it may actually be true. The borders have been shut so effectively that no one — not even the smugglers who have trafficked goods to and from China for years — is getting in or out.</p> <p>Nor is any information. North Korea has been a complete news void for almost two years. Defectors like Ryu, along with various intelligence services in South Korea and elsewhere, have been getting almost no reliable updates about what is really going on inside the North.</p> <p>The grand military spectacles that Korea regularly stages have continued during the pandemic, but they mask North Korea's suffering.</p>

	<p>Back in June, at a meeting of the ruling Workers' Party's Central Committee, Kim himself acknowledged that food scarcity loomed.</p> <p>"The people's food situation is now getting tense," he said, admitting that typhoons had damaged the country's grain crop. Analysts think it's likely that people are going hungry this winter.</p> <p>Kim Jong Un will mark the end of his first decade in power armed to the teeth, but more isolated than ever as he tries to battle a killer virus in one of the world's poorest countries.</p> <p>He's no closer to what he really wants, which is relief from devastating sanctions and normal relations with the rest of the world.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 Omicron strains covid testing capacity
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/covid-testing-omicron-variant/
GIST	<p>The U.S. was already struggling with limited supplies of rapid at-home tests and long turnaround times for lab-based tests in recent months, even though the number of COVID-19 infections remained relatively flat or was only slowly inching upward.</p> <p>Now as the highly infectious Omicron variant spreads rapidly — and winter weather strikes, and families prepare to gather for the holiday season — manufacturers of over-the-counter test kits and labs that process more sensitive polymerase chain reaction, or PCR tests, cannot keep pace with demand. These days, the sight of long lines of pedestrians queued up along sidewalks or motorists sitting bumper to bumper in parking lots for hours means one thing: People are waiting for COVID-19 tests.</p> <p>The Biden Administration acknowledged earlier this year that it needed to ramp up the nation's testing efforts, and pledged to make tests cheaper and more widely available by investing \$1 billion to expand the supply of at-home COVID-19 tests. But there are still not enough tests to go around as of mid-December.</p> <p>Just ask anyone who has tried to get their hands on an Abbot Labs or Quidel test kit — two popular varieties — in recent days and has struck out at multiple major pharmacies across New York City's five boroughs and beyond.</p> <p>"The Biden administration has done a lot to make testing more visible, stronger and more available; they shored up the supply chain and put in a lot of money to buy new tests. However, with Omicron it does not seem to be enough," said Mara Aspinall, a testing expert and professor of biomedical diagnostics at Arizona State University. "The perfect storm is the Omicron variant, the holidays and the winter season with the flu coming as well."</p> <p>The surge in demand for nearly every variety of COVID-19 test, including lab-based tests, rapid antigen tests administered at the point of care, and at-home testing kits, comes as the Omicron variant again upends how we interact as a society. It has, in recent weeks, sent students and faculty home early from colleges and universities, forced the closure of dozens of restaurants in New York City and elsewhere, and has delayed major employers' return to office dates — again.</p> <p>"Sadly we have not mastered it"</p> <p>The swelling number of positive tests in densely populated areas makes exposure to the virus likely, leading more individuals to seek tests as a precautionary measure to ensure they are healthy or, if they are infectious, not to expose others.</p> <p>"We are definitely lagging in our capacity," said Keri Althoff, a professor of epidemiology at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "Testing has been such a huge challenge since the very beginning of this epidemic and there have been times where it's gotten better. Sadly, we have not mastered it and Omicron is a formidable challenger to our testing system — and it's clear we are not keeping up."</p>

In New York City, for example, the percentage of people who have tested positive reached nearly 8% for the week ending December 17— more than double the seven-day average from a week earlier, according to [city data](#). The city calculates the positive test rate based on diagnostic tests including molecular-based PCR tests and antigen tests. Individuals who use at-home rapid tests do not always report results, indicating that the positivity rate could in fact be even higher.

The city calculates the positive test rate based on diagnostic test results, including molecular-based PCR tests, and antigen tests. Individuals who use at-home rapid tests do not always report results, indicating that the positivity rate could in fact be even higher.

The rapidity with which the Omicron variant has spread has caught facilities off guard. In addition, the lab technicians who process test results are not immune to the virus either, leading to staffing shortages and delays in test-processing times.

"People working in these environments are testing positive for Omicron and that takes them out of those workplaces," Althoff, added. "The spread happening in the community also impacts health care workers, and lab technicians work in communities — they are not somehow magically not susceptible to that community spread."

Free at-home test kits and other bright spots

Of course, some progress has been made since October, when President Biden announced his administration would ramp up testing efforts, which still lag behind other countries, like the U.K., where at-home testing kits are free and widely available.

Baltimore, Maryland-based Althoff said she was recently contacted by her city's department of health, which said it is now distributing free, at-home antigen test kits at the local public library.

"Of course that is a really critical piece of the testing puzzle because people can run that out of their homes without delay and make a decision to attend a holiday event based on those results," she said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last week started distributing free at-home test kits at select airports across the nation. They include Chicago O'Hare International Airport, Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, Miami International Airport and Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport, according to a CDC spokesperson. Test kits will soon also be available at airports in Detroit; Honolulu; Philadelphia and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

The pandemic has also spawned a veritable [cottage industry](#) in lab-based testing for COVID-19, with new labs and clinics seemingly popping up overnight to cope with new demand.

Clear19 Rapid Testing, founded in March 2020, before vaccines became available, uses a robotic lab for molecular-based testing that can process 90,000 specimens overnight, delivering test results to patients within 24 hours.

"We are continually expanding capacity and, anytime there is a surge, the lab can absorb the impact. That's why we can guarantee overnight results," said Sandy Walia, founder and director of Clear19.

Peter Foley, founder and CEO of Let's Get Checked, an at-home test kit company that makes lab-based COVID-19 tests, acknowledged that "with Omicron we've found ourselves in a similar situation as to where we were last year."

But Foley anticipated the Omicron-driven surge in demand, given the seasonality of the virus. "What's important is that we are getting pattern recognition for when the peaks may occur, with almost two years of data under the belt," he added.

	<p>Steven Crossley, head of operations and strategy at testing outfit Genetworx, which has administered nine million COVID-19 tests nationwide, said the company staffed up, in anticipation of a winter surge, and is still able to deliver PCR test results overnight.</p> <p>"We invested heavily in infrastructure and people and processes early on in the pandemic to make sure testing times for patients never fell behind. Today we are still delivering results in less than 24 hours," he said.</p> <p>Genetworx is also currently hiring, holding a virtual hiring event for medical technicians and specimen processors in its Woodbridge, New Jersey, laboratory.</p> <p>"We're going to continue to do what we need to do to make sure we stay within those turnaround times," Crossley said.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/20 CDC: omicron already dominant variant
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/omicron-dominant-covid-19-variant-us-cdc/story?id=81865272
GIST	<p>Just three weeks after it was first discovered in the United States, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention now estimates that the highly transmissible omicron variant is the dominant variant in the United States, representing 73% of new coronavirus cases, as of Dec. 18.</p> <p>The variant has now been detected in all but two states -- Oklahoma and North Dakota. In some parts of the country -- including the New York, New Jersey area, much of the South, the upper Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest, the omicron variant now accounts for more than 90% of new cases.</p> <p>The significant increase is 70% higher than just two weeks ago, when omicron, also known as B.1.1.529, was estimated to account for just 0.4% of all new cases.</p> <p>"This sharp rise in omicron was expected and is similar to what has been seen worldwide," the CDC said in a statement Monday. "We know layered prevention strategies can slow the spread of COVID-19."</p> <p>The World Health Organization and the CDC have both identified omicron as a variant of concern.</p> <p>Health officials and experts alike have warned that the omicron variant is a more infectious version of the disease, and is likely to cause a significant COVID-19 surge in the weeks and months to come.</p> <p>"This virus is extraordinary. It has a doubling time of anywhere from two to three days," Dr. Anthony Fauci, chief medical adviser to the White House, said on Sunday during an appearance on CNN's State of the Union.</p> <p>The country's latest COVID-19 resurgence comes just a week before Christmas and the New Year, as millions of Americans are set to gather and travel for the holidays.</p> <p>The U.S. is currently averaging more than 130,000 new cases a day, more than double the average from two months ago. Nationwide, nearly 70,000 Americans are currently hospitalized with COVID-19, and just under 1,200 Americans are still being reported lost to the virus every day.</p> <p>Health officials continue to urge the public to get vaccinated and boosted as soon as possible, given concerns over waning immunity.</p> <p>Early data from Moderna on Monday found that its current vaccine booster candidate increases antibody levels against omicron 37-fold. Earlier this month, Pfizer reported that its booster increased antibody levels 25-fold.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/20 Court adds to ban contractor vaccine rule
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/missouri-court-adds-ban-biden-contractor-vaccine-rule-81866034
GIST	<p>JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. -- A federal judge in Missouri added another legal block Monday against President Joe Biden's requirement that federal contractors receive COVID-19 vaccinations.</p> <p>The new preliminary injunction prohibits enforcement of the contractors' vaccine mandate in 10 states that collectively sued. It comes on top of a nationwide injunction issued earlier this month by a federal judge in Georgia.</p> <p>Biden's administration has tried to spur workplace vaccinations through a series of administrative orders that also affect federal employees, health care providers participating in the Medicare and Medicaid programs, and businesses with more than 100 employees. All face legal challenges.</p> <p>The requirement for federal contractors stems from a September executive order issued by Biden requiring compliance with workplace safety guidelines developed by a federal task force. That task force subsequently issued guidelines requiring that new, renewed or extended contracts include a clause requiring employees to be fully vaccinated by Jan. 18, with limited medical or religious exceptions. That meant those receiving a two-dose vaccine must get their second shot by Jan. 4.</p> <p>A judge in Kentucky initially barred enforcement of the requirement only in Kentucky, Ohio and Tennessee. A Georgia judge presiding over a separate lawsuit imposed a nationwide injunction on Dec. 7. The latest injunction — issued by U.S. Magistrate Judge David Noce in another lawsuit — applies in Alaska, Arkansas, Iowa, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming.</p> <p>Noce said the vaccine requirement likely exceeds the president's power to set purchasing rules as spelled out in federal law. Federal rules for contractors typically cover such things as employees' rights, wages and nondiscrimination policies, he said.</p> <p>“The vaccine mandate would reach beyond the workplace and into the realm of public health,” Noce wrote. “The Court concludes that plaintiffs are likely to succeed on the issue of whether the mandate exceeds the scope of the power granted to the President” under federal law.</p> <p>Biden's other vaccine mandates are in various stages of enforcement.</p> <p>A three-judge panel of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on Friday reversed a previous injunction against a Biden mandate that employers with more than 100 employees require their workers to be vaccinated or get tested weekly and wear masks. But Republican attorneys general, business associations and several conservative groups immediately appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.</p> <p>A separate requirement that health workers be vaccinated against COVID-19 is on hold in half the states due to preliminary injunctions. But Biden's administration has asked the Supreme Court to block those lower court orders</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 New Syria migrants seek Europe
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/syrian-migrants-seek-europe-driven-post-war-misery-81871875
GIST	<p>GIESSEN, Germany -- She had already walked for 60 hours through the wet, dark forests of Poland, trying to make her way to Germany, when the 29-year-old Syrian Kurd twisted her knee.</p> <p>It wasn't the first setback in Bushra's journey.</p>

Earlier, her road companion and best friend had fainted in a panic attack as Polish border guards chased them. They hid in ditches and behind trees as her friend tried to regain her breath, but it was no good. They turned themselves in and the guards dumped them back across the border into Belarus.

They quickly returned, bedraggled and wet, on the same trail. After twisting her knee, Bushra persevered. For two more days, she dragged her right foot behind her through the rain and freezing temperatures of the forests. Finally, they reached a Polish village where a car took them across the border into Germany — for a life she hopes will be free.

“I put up with the unbearable pain. Running away from something is sometimes the easiest thing,” Bushra said in the central German town of Giessen, where she applied for asylum as a refugee. “There is no future for us in Syria.”

Bushra, who asked that her last name be withheld for her own safety, is the face of the new Syrian migrant. More Syrians are leaving home, even though the 10-year-old civil war has wound down and conflict lines have been frozen for years.

They are fleeing not from the war’s horrors, which drove hundreds of thousands to Europe in the massive wave of 2015, but from the misery of the war’s aftermath. They have lost hope in a future at home amid abject poverty, rampant corruption and wrecked infrastructure, as well as continued hostilities, government repression and revenge attacks by multiple armed groups.

More than 78,000 Syrians have applied for asylum in the European Union so far this year, a 70% increase from last year, according to EU records. After Afghans, Syrians are the largest single nationality among this year’s nearly 500,000 asylum applicants so far.

Nine out of 10 people live in poverty in Syria. Around 13 million need humanitarian assistance, a 20% increase from the year before. The government is unable to secure basic needs, and nearly 7 million are internally displaced.

Roads, telecommunications, hospitals and schools have been devastated by the war and widening economic sanctions are making reconstruction impossible.

The coronavirus pandemic compounded the worst economic crisis since the war began in 2011. Syria’s currency is collapsing, and minimum wage is barely enough to buy five pounds of meat a month, if meat is even available. Crime and drug production are on the rise while militias, backed by foreign powers, operate smuggling rackets and control entire villages and towns.

The numbers are far below the levels of 2015, but desperate Syrians are racing to get out. Social media groups are dedicated to helping them find a way. Users ask where they can apply for work or scholarship visas. Others seek advice on the latest migration routes, cost of smugglers, and how risky it would be to use assumed identities to get out of Syria or enter other countries.

At the same time, Syria’s neighbors, grappling with their own economic crises, are calling for the refugees on their soil to be sent home. Among the new migrants to the EU are Syrians leaving Turkey or Lebanon, where they had been refugees for years.

Belarus briefly opened its border with Poland to migrants this summer. That created a standoff with the EU, which accuses Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko of orchestrating illegal migration in retaliation for European sanctions against him.

Bushra was one of only several thousand who managed to get through from Belarus, where 15 died trying to make the trek.

She left for Minsk from Irbil, Iraq, in late September.

It was the start of a harrowing journey. Bushra recounted how they survived on biscuits and water for days and how six of them slept sitting up on a single dry mat. Her friend broke a tooth shivering from the cold.

After the forest ordeal, they had to hide in a ditch at one point when a police patrol with sniffer dogs came to check their car. Riding along the highway, Bushra removed her head scarf to avoid suspicion at checkpoints. She reached Giessen on Oct. 12.

“I surprised myself by how I put up with all this,” Bushra said.

It was all worth it, she said. “When you lose hope, you follow a path more dangerous than where you started.”

Bushra’s life in Syria had been in upheaval for years. She was at university in the eastern city of Deir el-Zour when the war broke out in 2011 and anti-government protests spread in the city. She quickly moved to another university farther north. Soon Deir el-Zour and the rest of the east were taken over by the Islamic State group.

Bushra and her parents were outside IS rule in the Kurdish-held northeast but still lived in fear of violence. She hardly left the house for two years.

Eventually, she found a job with an international aid group. Ever since, she saved up to leave, checking into routes out of Syria.

Syria’s oil-rich northeast, which already suffered from years of neglect, was devastated by the war. Drought wrecked farmers’ livelihoods. The currency collapse gutted incomes. The salary of Bushra’s father, a government employee, is now worth \$15 a month, down from \$100 at the start of the war.

Moreover, the region was not secure. IS militants were defeated in 2019, but sleeper cells continue to target Kurdish-led security and civil administration.

Eight kidnappings were reported this summer in a town near her.

Threats were made against Bushra after she exposed a corruption case involving powerful local officials, causing her to fear for her life. She declined to give details because her family remains in Syria.

The harassment expedited her plans to leave and convinced her parents, who had been worried about a single woman going on such a journey alone.

The U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan this summer raised Bushra’s worries that the U.S. would also pull out its 900 troops in Syria’s Kurdish-administered northeast. The troops carry out anti-terrorism operations with local forces, and their presence also keeps rival forces at bay.

If they withdraw, she feared that Turkey, which considers the Kurdish-led forces in Syria as terrorists, could launch a military campaign against the Kurds. Syrian government forces would also move in, endangering Bushra because they consider those who work with international aid groups unregistered in Damascus as traitors.

“If I stay in Syria, I will be pursued by security all my life,” she said.

Gaining asylum and residency in Germany is her gateway to freedom.

She hopes to study political science to understand the news, which she boycotted since the war started to avoid scenes of the atrocities she was already living. She wants to have freedom to travel. “I am done with restrictions,” she said.

Going back to Syria is impossible, she said. If she doesn't get her papers in Germany, Bushra says she will keep trying.

"If I can't get to where I want to go, I will go to where I can live."

[Return to Top](#)

Cyber Awareness

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Meta sues operators of phishing sites
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/meta-facebook-sues-operators-of-39000-phishing-sites/
GIST	<p>Meta, the parent company for Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, has filed a lawsuit today in a California court against the operators of more than 39,000 phishing sites that have been hosted through the Ngrok service.</p> <p>The company is seeking to obtain a court injunction and damages of at least \$500,000 from the operators of these sites, even before they are identified, according to court documents obtained by <i>The Record</i>.</p> <p>The lawsuit alleged that the group created phishing sites on their local systems and then used Ngrok, a localhost-to-internet relay service that allows developers to expose their local sites on the ngrok.io domain.</p> <p>The group then spread links to these ngrok.io domains to victims and collected their account credentials.</p> <p>Meta said that since 2019, the operators of this scheme—listed in court documents as 100 unnamed John Does—are believed to have created and hosted more than 39,000 phishing sites impersonating the login pages of Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, and WhatsApp.</p> <p>“Starting in March 2021, when the volume of these attacks increased, we worked with the relay service to suspend thousands of URLs to the phishing websites,” Jessica Romero, Meta’s Director of Platform Enforcement and Litigation, said in a blog post today.</p> <p>Lawsuit described as “interesting tactic”</p> <p>But the lawsuit in itself is just weird. In an email today, Crane Hassold, Director of Threat Intelligence at Abnormal Security, described Meta’s lawsuit as an “interesting tactic.”</p> <p>“We’ve seen other large companies in the past, like Microsoft, use civil lawsuits to try and mitigate phishing threats, but those efforts were usually aimed at the infrastructure hosting phishing sites, rather than targeting anonymous actors like we’re seeing in this Facebook lawsuit,” Hassold said.</p> <p>The lawsuit isn’t the first of its kind, however, as some companies have also sued in the past to obtain court injunctions to prevent ransomware gangs from leaking their data.</p> <p>Such court rulings can help companies that have been the victims of a ransomware gang force hosting providers to take down data faster, having a legal document in hand.</p> <p>However, this is the first lawsuit filed against phishing site operators, but not filed against one singular gang, but all those who rely on a particular scheme—namely, using Ngrok as a relay system to temporarily host phishing sites.</p> <p>The simplicity of setting up a local site and then funneling it through a temporary Ngrok domain is also why the service has gained a massive popularity with phishing groups in recent years, having also often been used to host phishing sites with 2FA interception capabilities for Google and YouTube sites as well, so it is no surprise that Facebook is also dealing with the same issues.</p>

Lawsuit won't achieve anything but will create legal precedent

This also comes as, according to Hassold, the number of Meta-property phishing sites (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram) had increased substantially in recent years, consistently appearing among the most-phished brands in the world, which would explain Meta's new legal gymnastics.

"Well-known brands are diligent about protecting their brand, even against phishing threat actors," Tonia Dudley, Strategic Advisor at Cofense, also told *The Record* in an email.

"As far as this lawsuit having an impact on the threat actors, I suspect this legal action by Facebook is most likely aimed at setting a precedent that they will go after threat actors using their brand/name, while also showing they have the capability to identify who is behind the phishing campaigns," Dudley added. Hassold also echoed the Cofense exec's conclusion.

"Based on the content of the lawsuit, however, I don't see anything that would trigger a noticeable impact to the actual frequency of phishing attacks abusing Facebook's brands," Hassold said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Belgian defense ministry confirms hack
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/belgian-defense-ministry-confirms-cyberattack-through-log4j-exploitation/
GIST	<p>The Belgian Ministry of Defense has confirmed a cyberattack on its networks that involved the Log4j vulnerability.</p> <p>In a statement, the Defense Ministry said it discovered an attack on its computer network with internet access on Thursday. They did not say if it was a ransomware attack but explained that "quarantine measures" were quickly put in place to "contain the infected elements."</p> <p>"Priority was given to the operability of the network. Monitoring will continue. Throughout the weekend, our teams were mobilized to contain the problem, continue our operations and alert our partners," the Defense Ministry said.</p> <p>"This attack follows the exploitation of the Log4j vulnerability, which was made public last week and for which IT specialists around the world are jumping into the breach. The Ministry of Defense will not provide any further information at this stage."</p> <p>Multiple reports from companies like Google and Microsoft have indicated that government hacking groups around the world are leveraging the Log4j vulnerability in attacks.</p> <p>According to Microsoft, state-sponsored hackers from China, Turkey, Iran and North Korea have started testing, exploiting and using the Log4j bug to deploy a variety of malware, including ransomware.</p> <p>A number of reports have noted that since the vulnerability was discovered nearly two weeks ago, cybercriminal groups have sought to not only use it to gain a foothold in networks but sell that access to others, including governments.</p> <p>Governments around the world have urged agencies and organizations to patch their systems or figure out mitigations in order to avoid attacks and breaches. The US' Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency ordered all federal civilian agencies to patch systems before Christmas and Singapore held emergency meetings with critical information infrastructure sectors to prepare them for potential Log4j-related threats.</p> <p>Centre for Cybersecurity Belgium spokesperson Katrien Eggers told ZDNet that they too sent out a warning to Belgian companies about the Apache Log4j software issue, writing that any organization that had not already taken action should "expect major problems in the coming days and weeks."</p>

	<p>"Because this software is so widely distributed, it is difficult to estimate how the discovered vulnerability will be exploited and on what scale," the Centre for Cybersecurity Belgium said, adding that any affected organizations should contact them.</p> <p>"It goes without saying that this is a dangerous situation."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 Evil Corp is dodging US sanctions
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/ransomware/evil-corp-is-dodging-sanctions-by-dressing-up-as-revil
GIST	<p>The prolific ransomware group Evil Corp is sanctioned by the United States, creating legal and procedural barriers to pay their ransoms. Emsisoft believe the group is now identifying itself as a major competitor, REvil, to circumvent those sanctions.</p> <p>Michael Gillespie, the malware analyst with Emsisoft who first noted the deceptive approach on Twitter last week, told SC Media the methodology has been identified in a single attack so far. The REvil branding was promoted at several stages of the attack: encrypted files were given the ".revil" extension, the ransomware note named "revil.readme.txt.", the ransom site had a cartoonish ninja logo reading "REvil," and the note itself mentioned being from REvil several times. ("Q: If I don't want to cooperate? A: Just google: Revil ransomware," reads the note.)</p> <p>But the malware was easily attributed to Evil Corp, said Gillespie.</p> <p>"I compared the code to previous (unpacked) samples of PayloadBin and Hades samples, and the code perfectly overlaps all over the place," he said, adding that the file formats, use of cryptocurrency also matched up.</p> <p>Ignorance of a sanctioned group being behind a ransomware attack is not an excuse to make payments to groups on the Treasury Department's list of barred entities, known as the OFAC (Office of Foreign Assets Control) list.</p> <p>Treasury sanctioned Evil Corp for ties to Russian espionage efforts.</p> <p>Allan Liska, a ransomware expert with Recorded Future, said researchers had seen Evil Corp use similar tactics in the past.</p> <p>"The badass logo, no. But Evil Corp pretending to be other ransomware, yes," he said.</p> <p>Evil Corp has once before used an existing ransomware group for cover. In April, it played a similar trick claiming to be PayloadBin, the rebranded version of Babuk. Prior to that, Evil Corp had used several other aliases that were not established brands, including Phoenix, WastedLocker and Hades.</p> <p>REvil is an extremely prominent group to mimic. The original REvil was taken offline in October by hackers believed to be international military and law enforcement. But before then, REvil had supplied the malware used in the Kaseya and JBS attacks earlier in the year. Due to increased coverage of these instances, it is a name more casual followers of cybersecurity incidents are more likely to know.</p> <p>While the overwhelming consensus about Evil Corp's rapid name changes is that the group is trying to avoid sanctions, Brett Callow of Emsisoft said there might be one other explanation.</p> <p>"Whether you consider this to be a play intended to confuse victims or to provide them with plausible deniability depends on your level of cynicism," he said</p> <p>Color the industry cynical.</p> <p>"It's likely sanctions," said Gillespie.</p>

HEADLINE	12/20 Cyberattack impacts Australia companies
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/cyberattack-impacts-aussie/
GIST	<p>A cyber-attack on Australian recruitment company Finite Group is impacting both companies and government agencies across the country.</p> <p>Finite was compromised by threat actors in October in an incident that is still being investigated. During the attack, some of the company's data was exfiltrated and later published online.</p> <p>Information stolen in the attack includes the personal details of employment-seeking Australians who registered with the company. News source ABC viewed stolen data that contained individuals' resumes, salary details, and details of checks that had been carried out to verify their employment references, criminal history, and visa information.</p> <p>The cyber-criminals behind the attack threatened to release the data unless they received a ransom payment.</p> <p>Finite serves the recruitment needs of corporate clients and government agencies as well as those of individuals. Banks, businesses, and government agencies that have reportedly been impacted by the cyber-attack on Finite include Adairs, AMP, Westpac, Coles, ME Bank, Suez Australia, NBN Co., and the departments of defense, health, and home affairs.</p> <p>Finite said that it will contact any individuals and stakeholders impacted by the incident to notify them that their data may have been compromised.</p> <p>The Conti ransomware gang has claimed responsibility for the attack on Finite. In a notice posted on its website, the cyber-criminal organization bragged that it had stolen more than 300 gigabytes of data from Finite.</p> <p>The stash allegedly included financial data, contracts, NDA forms, customer databases with phone numbers and addresses, contracts with employees, scans of passports, and mail correspondence.</p> <p>Conti was also responsible for a recent attack on the South Australian government's payroll provider in which the personal information of public-sector workers in South Australia was compromised.</p> <p>The attack on Frontier Software exposed the names, dates of birth, tax file numbers, home addresses, bank account details, remuneration, and superannuation contributions of close to 80,000 workers.</p> <p>Speaking last week, State Treasurer Rob Lucas said: "I am advised all public sector employees, except for Department of Education staff who are on a different payroll system, should assume that their personal information has been accessed during Frontier Software's cyber-attack."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 Confidential UK police data on dark web
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/ransomware-gang-police-data-dark/
GIST	<p>The Clop ransomware gang has published confidential data held by UK police on the dark web, according to reports over the weekend.</p> <p>The <i>Mail on Sunday</i> reported that the notorious cybercrime group accessed the information following a successful phishing attack on IT services provider Dacoll in October 2021. This provided Clop with access to vast amounts of material, including data held on the police national computer (PNC), which Dacoll manages.</p>

According to the *Mail on Sunday*, the attackers uploaded hundreds of files on the dark web after Dacoll refused to pay a ransom demand. Among the PNC files uploaded were close-up images of motorists taken from the UK's National Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) system.

It is currently unclear whether Clop holds other information held by the UK Police that it could release in the future.

The report quoted a spokesman for the [National Cyber Security Centre](#) (NCSC), who stated: "We are aware of this incident and working with law enforcement partners to fully understand and mitigate any potential impact."

Breaches of data held by law enforcement agencies are especially concerning, given their highly confidential nature, the potential to disrupt criminal investigations and even fears serious risks will be posed to victims and witnesses of crime should the information fall into the wrong hands. Earlier this year, an [FoI request revealed there were more than 2300 data breach incidents](#) reported by just 22 UK police forces in 2020.

Commenting on the story, Jake Moore, cybersecurity specialist at [ESET](#), said: "You may be mistaken for thinking that sensitive data held by police is under very strong protection, but the truth is that even this level of security can still very easily be breached. The level of cybersecurity protection on offer remains as strong as the weakest link, which is often swung by the human factor. The release of personal information amplifies the attackers' demands and highlights their anger at not having their demands listened to.

"Like many persistent campaigns, Clop is very sophisticated and determined in their ways, making it very difficult to mitigate against. When very targeted attacks persist, it is very onerous to withstand, and therefore relying on current measures with a touch of good fortune is often the only answer. The release of this data could have very dangerous consequences for those affected and they should ideally be made aware to reduce any follow-on impact."

The Clop group is believed to be responsible for a number of major ransomware attacks in recent years, including on oil giant [Shell](#), [Swire Pacific Offshore](#) and the [University of California](#). In November, [Interpol revealed it is still on the hunt](#) for two suspected members of the Clop ransomware gang after making multiple arrests in the summer following a 30-month operation.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Hackers can penetrate 93% local networks
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/hackers-penetrate-93-local-networks/
GIST	<p>Cyber-attackers can breach 93% of organizations' network perimeters and gain access to their resources, according to new research from Positive Technologies.</p> <p>The study showed results from the company's penetration testing projects in the second half of 2020 and the first half of 2021. In the 93% of cases where the team was able to penetrate local company networks, it only took them an average of two days to do so.</p> <p>In addition, the researchers were able to confirm the feasibility of 71% of "unacceptable events" that 20% of the organizations requested being checked. These events included the disruption of technological processes and the provision of services, as well as the theft of funds and important information. All of these events could be conducted in under a month, with attacks on some systems taking only a matter of days.</p> <p>Another worrying finding was that an insider could gain complete control over the infrastructure of 100% of organizations.</p> <p>The organizations included in the analysis came from a range of vital sectors, including finance (29%), fuel and energy (18%), government (16%), industrial (16%) and IT (13%).</p>

	<p>The most common way of penetrating a corporate network was credential compromise (71% of organizations). This mainly resulted from easily guessable passwords, including for accounts used for system administration.</p> <p>The researchers added that most organizations had no network segmentation by business processes, enabling threat actors to develop several attack vectors simultaneously.</p> <p>Ekaterina Kilyusheva, head of research and analytics, Positive Technologies, commented: "In order to build an effective protection system, it is necessary to understand what unacceptable events are relevant for a particular company. Going down the path of the business process from unacceptable events to target and key systems, it is possible to track their relationships and determine the sequence of protection measures in use.</p> <p>"To make it more difficult for an attacker to advance inside the corporate network toward the target systems, there are a number of interchangeable and complementary measures organizations can take, including separation of business processes, configuration of security control, enhanced monitoring and lengthening of the attack chain. The choice of which technology solutions to use should be based on the company's capabilities and infrastructure."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/21 British Council hit by ransomware attacks
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/british-council-ransomware-attacks/
GIST	<p>A major UK public body has fallen victim to two successful ransomware attacks over the past five years, official figures have shown.</p> <p>The data, obtained from a freedom of information (FoI) request by the Parliament Street think tank, revealed that the British Council suffered a total of 12 days of downtime due to the incidents; five days in the first and seven in the second. No ransom was paid in either incident.</p> <p>The British Council is a non-departmental public organization that aims to connect people in the UK and other countries through culture, education and the English language. The official data also revealed that the body experienced a further six unsuccessful ransomware attacks over the five years. In these cases, either the ransomware was detected and blocked, or the malware was not deployed on the endpoint.</p> <p>There have been numerous ransomware incidents impacting UK public bodies in recent years. These include damaging attacks on Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council and Hackney Council in 2020. This weekend, it was reported that the notorious Clon ransomware gang published confidential data held by UK police on the dark web following an attack on an IT service provider.</p> <p>Last week, the UK government published a new wide-ranging national cyber strategy, which included plans to increase funding in public sector cybersecurity.</p> <p>Commenting on the figures, Edward Blake, area vice president EMEA for Absolute Software, said: "Every organization is vulnerable to ransomware attacks. A large portion of time and resources are spent trying to prevent them, but it is a matter of when they happen, not if they happen, and it is on organizations and businesses to put in place effective cybersecurity measures to deal with ransomware attacks when, not if, they occur.</p> <p>"Zero trust protocols are one of the most effective methods to preventing bad actors, which may already have access to a system, from infecting other aspects of the network or moving laterally through a system to seize even more data. What's more, maintaining a healthy network through effective cybersecurity measures is paramount to protecting organizations against cyber-criminals – self-healing capabilities are the perfect solution to ensuring that applications remain healthy without compromising on performance or productivity."</p>

HEADLINE	12/21 UK shares 225M passwords to breach site
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/uk-cyber-cops-225-million/
GIST	<p>UK cyber investigators have handed over 225 million stolen passwords to a popular data breach checking website, significantly expanding its reach.</p> <p>HaveIBeenPwned allows users to easily check if their email, phone number or password has been involved in a breach, enabling them to take action accordingly.</p> <p>However, the service is only as useful as the volume of compromised information stored in its databases. That's why founder Troy Hunt is particularly grateful to the National Crime Agency (NCA) for the new addition, which amounts to roughly a third of the 613 million credentials already stored in the site's Pwned Passwords service.</p> <p>The full set handed over by the NCA was nearly 586 million but reduced in size once already known passwords were stripped out.</p> <p>"During recent NCA operational activity, the National Cyber Crime Unit's Mitigation@Scale team were able to identify a huge amount of potentially compromised credentials (emails and associated passwords) in a compromised cloud storage facility. Through analysis, it became clear that these credentials were an accumulation of breached datasets known and unknown," explained an NCA statement.</p> <p>"The fact that they had been placed on a UK business's cloud storage facility by unknown criminal actors meant the credentials now existed in the public domain, and could be accessed by other third parties to commit further fraud or cyber-offenses."</p> <p>The NCA said that because the credentials were not attributable to a single platform or company, it decided sharing with Hunt would be the best option so individuals and companies globally could benefit.</p> <p>The news comes as Hunt announced a new "ingestion pipeline," which will enable law enforcement agencies like the FBI to continuously feed any newly discovered breached credentials into the service.</p> <p>"The premise is simple: during the course of their investigations, they come across a lot of compromised passwords and if they were able to continuously feed those into HIBP, all the other services out there using Pwned Passwords would be able to better protect their customers from account takeover attacks," said Hunt.</p> <p>"If you're using the Pwned Passwords API to check passwords, you're already benefiting; every new password added to the service will automatically be checked each time you call that API. Further, passwords already in the service are having their prevalence value updated to ensure you know just how bad those passwords really are."</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/21 Report: crypto-criminals net \$7.7B 2021
SOURCE	https://www.hackread.com/scammers-netted-7-7-billion-cryptocurrency-2021/
GIST	<p>Blockchain analysis firm Chainalysis has revealed startling details about the devastation cybercriminals managed to cause during 2021. According to a preview of its "2022 Crypto Crime Report" due to be released in February 2022, cryptocurrency-oriented scammers and cyber criminals grabbed around \$7.7 billion worth of cryptocurrency from their targets this year. This marks an 81% increase in losses compared to the statistics released in 2020.</p> <p>Cryptocurrency-based Crime- The Biggest Threat</p>

Around \$1.1 billion of the overall \$7.7 billion in losses accounted for one particular scam that targeted users in Russia and Ukraine. Chainanalysis confirmed that cryptocurrency-based crimes posed “one of the biggest threats to cryptocurrency’s continued adoption.”

The number of scam addresses deposits decreased to 4.1 million from 10.7 million, indicating a drop in individual scam victims. Moreover, scammers’ money laundering tactics more or less remained the same, as compared to last year, since most of the grabbed crypto transferred through scam addresses ended up at mainstream exchanges.

Rug Pulls- Main Source of Cryptocurrency Losses

[Rug Pulls](#) were declared one of the primary sources of the increase in cryptocurrency losses this year as they accounted for 37% of all cryptocurrency scam revenues, which totaled around \$2.8 billion. This is 1% higher than the rate identified in 2020. Rug Pulls is where a new cryptocurrency developer vanishes, taking along supporters’ funds.

“Rug pulls are prevalent in DeFi because, with the right technical know-how, it’s cheap and easy to create new tokens on the Ethereum blockchain or others and get them listed on decentralized exchanges (DEXes) without a code audit,” Chainanalysis blog post read.

“While total scam revenue increased significantly in 2021, it stayed flat if we remove rug pulls and limit our analysis to investment scams—even with the emergence of Finiko,” Chainanalysis noted.

Investment Scam Characteristics

Chainanalysis identified that investment scam networks operated differently this year and that the number of ongoing financial scams increased from 2,052 in 2020 to around 3,300 in 2021.

On the other hand, on an individual basis, their lifespan decreased from around 500 days in 2016 to 291 days in 2020, and this year it further dropped to 70 days.

Chainanalysis experts also noted that previously such scams could continue operating for a long time, but now their lifespan has reduced considerably given that law enforcement authorities and regulators are more concerned about it.

The takeaway?

According to Chainanalysis, the takeaway from their [report’s preview](#) is to avoid new tokens that haven’t yet undergone a code audit. It is a process where a third-party firm assesses the code of the smart contract behind another [DeFi project](#) or a new token and confirms that the contract’s governance rules are “iron-clad and contain no mechanisms that would allow for the developers to make off with investors’ funds.”

Furthermore, investors should remain aware of tokens that lack publicly known materials, which guarantees the legitimacy of a project. These include white paper, websites, and tokens created by individuals without using their real names.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 T-Mobile: 21B scam calls blocked this year
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/t-mobile-says-it-blocked-21-billion-scram-calls-this-year/
GIST	<p>T-Mobile says it blocked 21 billion scam, spam, and unwanted robocalls this year through its free Scam Shield robocall and scam protection service, amounting to an average of 1.8 billion scam calls identified or blocked every month.</p> <p>Furthermore, based on data through early December 2021, the carrier found that scam call traffic has reached an all-time high, jumping over 116% from 2020 to a total of roughly 425 million scam call attempts every week.</p>

Last year, when it [announced the Scam Shield service](#), T-Mobile said it could detect or block approximately 12 billion scam calls in 2019 and that around 30 million Americans fell victim to a phone scam within 12 months.

"T-Mobile Scam Shield has identified or blocked over 21 BILLION calls for T-Mobile and Metro by T-Mobile customers through early December 2021," the company [revealed](#) today in its 2021 Scam and Robocall Report.

"The lowest measured month for scam traffic was January 2021, identifying 1.1 billion calls as Scam Likely. By November, volume had increased exponentially, and T-Mobile identified double the January traffic at 2.5 billion calls as Scam Likely."

More than half of these 21 billion calls were related to fake vehicle warranty scams, with other top scam attempts pretending to be with the Social Security office (10%), the wireless provider (9%), car insurance company (6%), or package delivery (4%).

The scammers' favorite targets throughout 2021 were people from Texas, Florida, Arizona, and Georgia, the most targeted being those in the Dallas/Fort Worth area code.

In related news, AT&T [said](#) in March 2021 that its AT&T ActiveArmor service blocked or detected over 16 billion spam calls since 2016, with 17 million spam calls identified each day in 2020 alone after examining billions of calls every day for robocall patterns.

In June, Verizon also [revealed](#) that around 78 million Verizon customers were protected from more than 13 billion unwanted calls by the Verizon Call Filter.

T-Mobile customers can enable Scam Block to have robocalls and scam calls blocked automatically using one of these methods:

1. Dial #662# from their T-Mobile device
2. Log in to My T-Mobile or the T-Mobile app, where they'll see an option to turn on Scam Block
3. Turn Scam Block on for their DIGITS numbers by dialing 611 from the T-Mobile device to speak to a mobile expert
4. Download the free [Scam Shield app](#) starting 7/24, and toggle on Scam Block

AT&T customers can get ActiveArmor by following the instructions available [here](#), while Verizon users can find more info on how to get and use Call Filter from [here](#).

"Attempted scam calls hit record highs in 2021, but with Scam Shield we are identifying or blocking an average 1.8 billion calls each month — or 700 calls per second! — for our T-Mobile and Metro by T-Mobile customers," [said](#) Jon Freier, the President of T-Mobile's Consumer Group.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 FBI: state hackers exploit Zoho zero-day
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/fbi-state-hackers-exploiting-new-zoho-zero-day-since-october/
GIST	<p>The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) says a zero-day vulnerability in Zoho's ManageEngine Desktop Central has been under active exploitation by state-backed hacking groups (also known as APTs or advanced persistent threats) since at least October.</p> <p>"Since at least late October 2021, APT actors have been actively exploiting a zero-day, now identified as CVE-2021-44515, on ManageEngine Desktop Central servers," the FBI's Cyber Division said [PDF].</p> <p>"The APT actors were observed compromising Desktop Central servers, dropping a webshell that overrides a legitimate function of Desktop Central, downloading post-exploitation tools,</p>

enumerating domain users and groups, conducting network reconnaissance, attempting lateral movement and dumping credentials."

The security flaw, [patched by Zoho in early December](#), is a critical authentication bypass vulnerability attackers could exploit to execute arbitrary code on vulnerable Desktop Central servers.

CISA [added CVE-2021-44515 to its Known Exploited Vulnerabilities Catalog](#) on December 10, requiring federal agencies to patch it before Christmas under [Binding Operational Directive \(BOD\) 22-01](#).

Customers warned to patch their servers

After patching the vulnerability, the company also warned customers of ongoing exploitation attempts urging them to immediately deploy the security updates to block incoming attacks.

"As we are noticing indications of exploitation of this vulnerability, we strongly advise customers to update their installations to the latest build as soon as possible," Zoho said.

To detect if your server was breached using this security flaw, you can use Zoho's Exploit Detection Tool and go through the steps detailed [here](#).

The company advises backing up critical business data, disconnecting impacted network systems, formatting all compromised servers, [restoring](#) Desktop Central, and updating to the latest build.

If signs of compromise are found, Zoho recommends initiating a password reset "for all services, accounts, Active Directory, etc. that has been accessed from the service installed machine," together with Active Directory administrator passwords.

According to Shodan, there are [over 2,900 ManageEngine Desktop Central instances](#) exposed to incoming attacks.

ManageEngine servers under siege

In recent years, Zoho ManageEngine servers have been under constant targeting, with Desktop Central instances, for instance, having been hacked and access [to their networks sold on hacking forums](#) since July 2020.

Between August and October 2021, Zoho ManageEngine installations have also been attacked by nation-state hackers using tactics and tooling similar to those employed by the Chinese-linked APT27 hacking group.

In these attacks, the threat actors focused their efforts on breaching the networks of critical infrastructure organizations worldwide in three different campaigns.

They first used an [ADSelfService zero-day exploit](#) between early August and mid-September, then switched to an [n-day AdSelfService exploit](#) until late October, and moved to [a ServiceDesk one starting with October 25](#).

Following these campaigns, the FBI and CISA issued joint advisories ([1](#), [2](#)) warning of APT actors exploiting these ManageEngine flaws to drop web shells on the networks of breached critical infrastructure orgs, including healthcare, financial services, electronics, and IT consulting industries.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Russian extradited: illegal hacking, trading
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/threat-intelligence/russian-national-extradited-for-illegal-hacking-trading
GIST	A Russian national has been extradited to the United States, where he faces charges related to his alleged involvement in an operation to trade on nonpublic information taken from US computer networks. The scheme generated tens of millions of dollars in illicit profits, the Justice Department wrote in a release.

Vladislav Klyushin was arrested in Sion, Switzerland, on March 21, 2021, and extradited to the US on Dec. 18. He is charged with conspiring to obtain unauthorized access to computers and to commit wire fraud and securities fraud, as well as obtaining unauthorized access to computers, wire fraud, and securities fraud.

Four other Russian nationals were also charged as part of this operation, the DoJ reports. Ivan Ermakov, Nikolai Rumiantcev, Mikhail Vladimirovich Irzak, and Igor Sergeevich Sladkov all remain at large.

Charging documents state the five individuals worked at Moscow-based IT company M-13, which purported to offer penetration testing and advanced persistent threat emulation. In addition to these, three of the defendants, including Klyushin, allegedly offered investment management services through M-13 to investors in exchange for up to 60% of the profit.

Around the time between January 2018 and September 2020, the defendants allegedly agreed to trade in the securities of publicly traded companies based on material nonpublic information (MPNI) about these companies' earnings, ahead of the public financial results. The information was allegedly obtained via unauthorized intrusions into computer networks of two US-based filing agents — organizations that publicly traded companies use to make quarterly and annual filings through the Securities and Exchange Commission.

The charging documents state that Klyushin and co-conspirators gained access to the filing agents' computer networks and stole the data, which allowed them to see how companies would perform and trade accordingly.

[Return to Top](#)

Read the [full DoJ release](#) for more information.

HEADLINE	12/20 Attacks shut building automation systems
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/attacks-breaches/lights-out-cyberattacks-shut-down-building-automation-systems
GIST	<p>A building automation engineering firm experienced a nightmare scenario: It suddenly lost contact with hundreds of its building automation system (BAS) devices — light switches, motion detectors, shutter controllers, and others — after a rare cyberattack locked the company out of the BAS it had constructed for an office building client.</p> <p>The firm, located in Germany, discovered that three-quarters of the BAS devices in the office building system network had been mysteriously purged of their "smarts" and locked down with the system's own digital security key, which was now under the attackers' control. The firm had to revert to manually flipping on and off the central circuit breakers in order to power on the lights in the building.</p> <p>The BAS devices, which control and operate lighting and other functions in the office building, were basically bricked by the attackers. "Everything was removed ... completely wiped, with no additional functionality" for the BAS operations in the building, explains Thomas Brandstetter, co-founder and general manager of Limes Security, whose industrial control system security firm was contacted in October by the engineering firm in the wake of the attack.</p> <p>Brandstetter's team, led by security experts Peter Panholzer and Felix Eberstaller, ultimately retrieved the hijacked BCU (bus coupling unit) key from memory in one of the victim's bricked devices, but it took some creative hacking. The engineering firm then was able to reprogram the BAS devices and get the building's lighting, window shutters, motion detectors, and other systems back up and running.</p> <p>But the attack was no anomaly. Limes Security has since been getting reports of similar types of attacks on BAS systems that run on KNX, a building automation system technology widely deployed in Europe. Just last week, Limes Security was contacted by another engineering firm in Europe that had suffered an eerily similar type of attack as the German firm — on a KNX BAS system that locked it out as well.</p>

"What was interesting ... is the attackers here misused what was supposed to be a security feature, a programming password [the BCU key] that would lock out an adversary from manipulating the components," Panholzer says.

"Luckily for us and the [BAS] operators so far in each of the incidents we have been involved with, the attackers set the same password for all components" in the victims' respective BAS networks, Panholzer says. "In theory, there could be a different password for each and every component, and that would actually make recovery much, much harder."

For its part, KNX warns in its product support information that the BCU key security feature should be deployed carefully for the engineering tool software (ETS): "Use this option with care; if the password is lost, those devices shall be returned to the manufacturer. Forgotten BCU Key in the devices cannot be changed or reset externally because this would make the protection in ETS meaningless (of course, the manufacturers know how to do this)," the KNX Association vendor [says on its support page](#).

But in reality, most manufacturers of these devices are unable to retrieve pilfered BCU keys, Panholzer notes. The German engineering firm initially went to its BAS device vendors for help, but the vendors informed the firm they were unable to access the keys.

There have been other indirect reports of similar attacks on KNX-based systems, he says. "There seems to kind of an attack wave. We're not fully aware how" widespread it is, however, he says.

"What is apparent is that it came out of nowhere: Suddenly, there were many attacks happening that we are aware of," says Panholzer, who plans to present [the case - which the company calls KNXlock](#) - at the S4x22 ICS security conference next month in Miami. Limes Security declined to identify the victim organizations that have been hit in the attacks for confidentiality reasons.

There are no clues so far to trace back to the attackers. BAS systems aren't configured with any logging functions, so the attackers don't leave behind any digital footprints per se. Their attacks left no ransom notes nor signs of ransomware, so it's unclear even what the endgame of the attacks was.

"My theory here is there may be a single or few sources of attackers, but we don't know for sure" because of the lack of logs, Panholzer says.

The Limes Security researchers, meanwhile, have set up a honeypot system to see if they can lure the attackers into going after their phony BAS as a way to gather intel on where the attacks are originating. So far, though, no one has taken the bait.

The smart building system is an oft-forgotten attack vector that straddles the physical security and cybersecurity worlds. Building hacks thus far have been rare, with a couple of notable ones making headlines to date: a 2016 ransomware attack on a hotel in Austria that hit room locks, and [a distributed denial-of-service attack on heating systems in two apartment buildings in Finland](#) in 2016.

Limes Security's Brandstetter has been studying BAS vulnerabilities for a few years now. In 2017, he presented [research at Black Hat USA on hacking BAS systems](#). He demonstrated scenarios of how KNX and BACnet, another popular BAS technology standard that's used widely in the US, could be abused by attackers.

In 2018, Forescout's Elisa Costante and her team [wrote test malware, including a worm, that they used to expose software vulnerabilities in some 11,000 BAS devices](#), including protocol gateways, and programmable logic controllers for HVAC systems and access control. They presented their research at S4x19 in 2019.

How the Smart Building Hack Happened

The German engineering firm's BAS system was initially infiltrated via an unsecured UDP port left

exposed on the public Internet. From there, the attackers — who the Limes team believe were knowledgeable about KNX architecture — "unloaded" or basically wiped the BAS devices of their functionality, and then set them with the BCU key, which they locked with a password of their own.

The BCU key in KNX is for preventing unwanted changes to a device: To make a change, you need the password to the device. The Limes team asked the engineering firm to ship them a few of their BAS devices so they could figure out how to recover the keys. Brute-force hacking would take over a year to pull off, they concluded, because authentication response times are so slow with the devices.

"The BCU key is actually just a 4-byte string and eight characters," Panholzer explains. "One would think 4 bytes would be easy to brute-force, but the devices are very slow in answering" in response, he says.

They came up with a plan to try to read from the CPU memory on the devices that hadn't set protections for their CPUs. To narrow their search, they focused on areas in memory where they thought the key would likely be stored, and brute-forced those for the password. They basically programmed three different images of the device memory so they could locate where the address was stored.

"We could [then] limit the suspected area to a smaller pile of bytes, and fed this to the brute-force" tool, he explains.

Forty-five minutes later, they unearthed the BCU key. It matched for all four devices — from different vendors — they had in hand, so they were confident it would work across all of the devices. The engineering firm typed the BCU key into their programming software and got the BAS system back up and running within 30 minutes, after several weeks of having to manually control lighting and other automated services in the building.

Security Gap

The underlying theme these recent attacks underscore: Many of the professionals who install and manage BAS systems like KNX's are not on IT or security teams. Rather, BAS systems are typically the domain of engineers and building management firms. IT and security teams rarely intersect with BAS operations, and that can be problematic.

Consider the European building management firm that contacted Limes Security last week. The victims believe the attackers got in via an IP gateway that had been temporarily installed in the construction phase of the building. The IP gateway "was supposed to be removed after handing over the building," Panholzer notes. "But it was forgotten and never deactivated."

Brussels-based BAS vendor [KNX provides specific security recommendations for organizations](#) that deploy its software and network standards. These include using a VPN for any Internet-based connections to the system, segmenting its KNX IP Backbone network from other IP networks via VLANs, and placing a firewall between the KNX IP network and other networks.

"We found good documentation and recommendations" by KNX on properly securing BAS systems, Panholzer says. "They try to include a lot of security awareness in their material."

KNX had not yet responded to a query from Dark Reading at the time of this posting.

Finding exposed BAS systems is as simple as a Shodan scan, notes Stephen Cobb, an independent risk researcher. That's likely how the attackers are zeroing in on vulnerable building systems.

While BAS attacks to date remain relatively rare, they could be lucrative for cybercriminals, he notes. "This could be a future area of criminal exploitation that's very serious. It has all the ingredients to be like ransomware," says Cobb, formerly with ESET. "Unsecured pieces out there can be found and exploited."

	Ransomware and extortion attacks on a BAS could be used to target facility management companies, or more ominously, hospitals, he says. Even so, there are easier methods of extortion today: "Unsecured RDP and phishing are yielding just enough targets" to remain the dominant attack vectors, he notes.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 New Log4j attack vector discovered
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/application-security/researchers-uncover-new-attack-vector-for-log4j-flaw
GIST	<p>Organizations working to reduce exposure to attacks targeting the Log4j remote code execution (RCE) vulnerability disclosed Dec. 9 have a couple of new considerations to keep in mind.</p> <p>Security researchers at Blumira have discovered that threat actors can potentially trigger the RCE flaw on internal and locally exposed Log4j applications via a JavaScript WebSocket connection — suggesting the attack surface may be much larger than first thought. Meanwhile, the Apache Foundation over the weekend released yet another update to fix a third vulnerability in the logging framework in recent days, meaning that organizations will once again need to patch their software to remain fully protected against the threat.</p> <p>According to Blumira, attackers can exploit the Log4j RCE flaw by luring users to any server that runs JavaScript to initiate a WebSocket connection. WebSocket is a communication protocol that many modern browsers use for bidirectional communication between the server and client. The site would make calls to the user's system or local network using WebSocket. If the victim's host is vulnerable, it is then forced to call out to another attacker-controlled website over LDAP, RMI, DNS, HTTP or other protocol and download malicious JavaScript for exploiting the Log4j RCE, says Matthew Warner, CTO and co-founder of Blumira.</p> <p>"If the victim had a vulnerable version of Log4j and it was logging out requests to paths being requested and/or the origin of those requests, it would trigger the Log4j JNDI lookup to the malicious host," Warner says. "No additional effort would be required."</p> <p>Warner says Blumira's research shows the impact of Log4j isn't limited to vulnerable servers.</p> <p>"Anyone with a service that utilizes a vulnerable Log4j version on their machine or local private network can browse a website and potentially trigger the vulnerability," Warner says. It significantly expands the attack surface and is another weapon that operators of phishing and malicious advertising scams are likely to exploit, he says.</p> <p>The new attack vector should not complicate matters for organizations that already are following the recommended remediation steps for Log4j. "However, it does highlight the importance of patching all local development and internal servers," Warner says.</p> <p>Three Vulnerabilities — So Far</p> <p>Log4j is a near-ubiquitous logging tool in Java environments. Since Dec. 9, three unique vulnerabilities have been disclosed in the logging framework, each of varying severity. The most serious one is the critical RCE vulnerability (CVE-2021-44228) that the Apache Foundation disclosed Dec. 9. The flaw exists in a Java Naming and Directory Interface (JNDI) lookups feature that is enabled by default in versions Log4j 2.0-beta9 to Log4j 2.14.1.</p> <p>Attackers can exploit the feature to take complete remote control of vulnerable systems, which can include Internet-facing systems, internal systems, network components, virtual machines, industrial control and SCADA systems, and cloud-hosted assets.</p> <p>The Apache Foundation released an updated version of the logging framework (Log4j 2.15.0) for Java 8 users on Dec. 10 to address the vulnerability amid reports of attackers actively seeking to exploit the flaw.</p>

It then followed up with a [second update](#) on Dec. 13 (Log4j 2.16.0 for Java 8 and Log4j 2.12.2 for Java 7) because the original fix basically ended up opening systems to denial-of-service (DoS) attacks ([CVE 2021-45046](#)) under certain conditions.

On Dec. 18, the Apache Foundation issued another update (Log4j 2.17.0 for Java 8) to address a third, infinite recursive vulnerability in Log4j ([CVE-2021-45105](#)) that it described as allowing for DoS attacks.

"Infinite recursion is code calling itself again and again and again," says Saryu Nayyar, CEO of Gurukul. "Eventually, it will overflow the memory allocated to it, and provide the ability to inject malicious code outside of the defined memory space."

Both CVE 2021-45046 and CVE-2021-45105 can only be exploited under [specific nondefault conditions](#) and are therefore considered less severe than [CVE-2021-44228](#), the flaw that was disclosed on Dec. 9, which affects a very wide swath of organizations.

According to security researchers at [Google](#), the bug affects more than 35,000 Java packages — or more than 8% — of all packages on [Maven Central](#), one of the largest repositories of Java packages. The pervasiveness of the flaw and the relative ease with which it can be exploited has attracted widespread attention within the threat actor community.

Security vendors have reported seeing numerous financially motivated attackers as well as state-backed threat groups from countries such as Iran, China, and Turkey actively trying to exploit the flaw.

The activity prompted the US Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) to issue [an emergency directive Friday](#) ordering all civilian federal agencies to take a series of measures to identify, patch, or mitigate vulnerable systems. Agencies have until Dec. 23 to comply with the requirements of the directive.

The latest developments come amid signs that organizations are making at least some progress in addressing the threat. An analysis that cloud security vendor Wiz conducted shows that 10 days after the flaw was disclosed, organizations on average have patched some 45% of their vulnerable cloud resources. However, the vendor found that 45% of vulnerable machines remain unprotected against the threat. Of these systems, 25% had administrative privileges and 7% were exposed to the Internet.

Meanwhile, a [dashboard](#) that Sonatype launched this week to track Log4j downloads showed that there were more than 4.6 million downloads of the logging tool since Dec. 10. Forty percent of what the company described as the "most recent downloads" were of vulnerable versions of Log4j.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 US, UK aid Ukraine cybersecurity
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/us/politics/russia-ukraine-cyberattacks.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — In the closing days of 2015, the lights went out across a swath of Ukraine as Russian hackers remotely took over an electric utility's control center and flipped off one power station after another, while the company's operators stared at their screens helplessly.</p> <p>The next year, the same thing happened, this time around Kyiv, the capital.</p> <p>Now the United States and Britain have quietly dispatched cyberwarfare experts to Ukraine in hopes of better preparing the country to confront what they think may be the next move by President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia as he again menaces the former Soviet republic: Not an invasion with the 175,000 troops he is massing on the border, but cyberattacks that take down the electric grid, the banking system, and other critical components of Ukraine's economy and government.</p> <p>Russia's goal, according to American intelligence assessments, would be to make Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, look inept and defenseless — and perhaps provide an excuse for an invasion.</p>

In one sense, the Russian cybercampaign against Ukraine never stopped, American officials say, though until recently it bubbled along at a low level. But in interviews, American officials and experts say the action has stepped up over the past month even while public attention has been focused on the troop buildup.

“It’s a widespread campaign targeting numerous Ukrainian government agencies, including internal affairs — the national police — and their electric utilities,” said Dmitri Alperovitch, a leading investigator of Russian cyberactivity and the chairman of Silverado Policy Accelerator, a new research group in Washington.

Mr. Alperovitch, who emigrated from Russia to the United States as a child, said the Russian leader sees the cyberattacks as “preparation of the battlefield.”

American officials say a military invasion is far from a certainty. “The current assessment of the U.S. government is that he has not made a decision,” said Jake Sullivan, President Biden’s national security adviser, speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations. Mr. Sullivan did not address the Russian cyberactivity, but it has been an intense focus at the White House, the C.I.A., the National Security Agency and United States Cyber Command, whose “cyber mission forces” are deployed to identify vulnerabilities around the world.

The Russian cyberactivity was discussed by roughly a dozen officials, who requested anonymity because the information was derived from classified intelligence and sensitive discussions about how to mitigate the Russian threat. Those conversations have focused on whether Mr. Putin thinks that a crippling of Ukraine’s infrastructure could be his best hope of achieving his primary goal: ousting the Ukrainian government and replacing it with a puppet leader.

The calculus, one senior intelligence official said, would be that such an attack would not require him to occupy the country — or suffer as many of the sanctions that would almost certainly follow a physical invasion.

Already Mr. Putin has been working to build support domestically and in Africa and South and Central America. Russian-led information campaigns have been focused on denigrating the Ukrainian government and accusing its leader of creating a humanitarian crisis in the country’s east, where Ukrainian government forces have been battling Russia-led separatists for years, according to U.S. and allied officials.

American officials declined to describe the cyberteams that have been inserted into Ukraine. In a statement, the Biden administration said only that “we have long supported Ukraine’s efforts to shore up cyberdefenses and increase its cyberresiliency.”

A spokeswoman for the British government said the assistance that Britain and its allies were providing was defensive in nature.

While neither government would provide details, officials said the United States was considering a larger deployment, including resources from U.S. Cyber Command. But it is unclear how much good a bigger team could do beyond demonstrating support.

“There’s too much to patch,” one American official said.

The Ukrainian grid was built in the days of the Soviet Union, connected to Russia’s. It has been upgraded with Russian parts. The software is as familiar to the attackers as to its operators. And while Ukraine has repeatedly vowed to fix its system, Mr. Putin’s hackers, or at least teams loyal to him, have shown time and time again that they know how to bring parts of the country to a halt.

In an interview, Sean Plankey, a former Energy Department cyberexpert who is now an executive at DataRobot, said that Russian hackers understand every linkage in the design — and most likely have insiders who can help them.

As the Ukrainians have learned, a cyberattack on critical infrastructure is particularly difficult to deter. In the cyberworld, there is no broad consensus about what constitutes an act of war, nor agreement about how deeply Mr. Putin could harm Ukraine without triggering a Western response. In the past, his attacks on Ukraine have resulted in almost no response.

The 2015 attack, which began in late December, was particularly instructive. It was directed at a major operator of Ukraine's grid. Videos taken during the attack showed a skeleton crew of operators — the attackers knew the holidays would be a particularly vulnerable time — struggling to understand what was happening as hackers took over their screens remotely. Substations were flipped off. Neighborhood by neighborhood, lights went dark.

"It was jaw-dropping for us," Andy Ozment, who ran cyberemergency response for the Department of Homeland Security and helped investigate the attacks, said at the time. "The exact scenario we were worried about wasn't paranoia. It was playing out before our eyes." The hackers had a final flourish: The last thing they turned off was the emergency power at the utility company's operations center, so that the Ukrainian workers were left sitting in their seats in the dark, cursing.

With the holidays approaching again, American officials say they are on high alert. But if Mr. Putin does launch a cyberattack, either as a stand-alone action or as a precursor to a physical-world attack, it will most likely come after Orthodox Christmas, at the end of the first week of January, according to people briefed on the intelligence.

U.S. and allied officials have discussed a variety of sanctions that could possibly deter Russia. But all of the measures that could possibly cut deep enough for Russia to care would also cause pain in Europe, which is highly dependent on Russia for winter energy supplies.

Senator Angus King of Maine, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said in an interview that if an invasion does take place, the first sign will be in cyberspace.

"I don't think there's a slightest doubt that if there is an invasion or other kind of incursion into Ukraine, it will start with cyber," said Mr. King, an independent who caucuses with the Democrats.

Mr. King has long argued that the United States and its allies need to think more deeply about how to deter cyberattacks. The United States, Mr. King said, should issue a declaratory policy about what the consequences for such attacks will be.

"So the question is," Mr. King said, "what are our tools to deter that?"

Representative Mike Gallagher, Republican of Wisconsin who along with Mr. King leads the Cyberspace Solarium Commission, said the United States should try to prevent a cyberattack on Ukraine by making it clear it would prompt a strong response.

"We should be preparing our own cyberresponse," Mr. Gallagher said. "We have very powerful weapons in the cyberdomain that we could use against Putin if he chooses to go further. We seem divided, but there's a lot of options we have to prevent this from devolving into a full-on crisis."

A cyberoperation retains allure for Moscow over a full-on military operation, because Russia can operate under a thin veil of deniability. And Mr. Putin has demonstrated over the last decade that the flimsiest of disguises is good enough.

In previous cyberattacks on Ukraine, Russian operatives made the incursions look like the work of criminal groups.

"After the fact, you can be pretty sure what we saw was state activity, using the false flag of criminal activity," said Jim Richberg, the former national intelligence manager for cyber and now a vice president

	<p>at Fortinet, a security firm. “They wanted it to have this broad impact on critical infrastructure in Ukraine and make it look like it was a criminal thing that went awry.”</p> <p>For Mr. Putin, a cyberattack that he can officially deny, but no one doubts is his handiwork, is the best of both worlds.</p> <p>“For someone like Putin, part of it is to be seen, to deliver a message,” Mr. Richberg said. “They can be good, but being good doesn’t mean they want to be invisible.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/20 China disappears top online influencer
SOURCE	https://www.protocol.com/bulletins/china-influencer-viya-erased
GIST	<p>China’s top ecommerce influencer Huang Wei, commonly known as Viya, was fined 1.341 billion RMB (\$210 million) for tax evasion, the local taxation authority said Monday, and her social media accounts, which have more than 120 million followers combined, have been taken down.</p> <p>In recent years, Viya has emerged as powerful force in livestream ecommerce, a new shopping method that has taken China by storm and dwarfed traditional ecommerce activities. On the evening of Oct. 20 alone, Viya sold \$1.3 billion worth of products in her livestream. She has also become an entertainment celebrity, even performing for the most important national holiday celebration.</p> <p>Among all livestream influencers, Viya not only stood out for her sales numbers but also for how closely she has aligned with China’s government. She was co-opted as a member of the All-China Youth Federation and won a National Poverty Alleviation Award for the voluntary work she has done in promoting China’s rural ecommerce products.</p> <p>According to Zhejiang Provincial Tax Service, from 2019 to 2020 Viya failed to report taxes mounting \$110 million. Her \$210 million fine includes the unpaid taxes, late fees and penalties.</p> <p>Beijing has been increasingly cracking down on tax evasions by prominent influencers as the sky-high sales numbers have attracted public attention. Last month, two other A-level livestream influencers have also been fined heavily and suspended on social media for tax evasion.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/20 Bitcoin 1% control outsized share of wealth
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/bitcoin-ownership-cryptocurrency-nber-one-percent/
GIST	<p>Cryptocurrency has been touted as a new form of digital money not tied to government or a central bank and is therefore inherently free from bias and unequal distribution. However, a recent study by the National Bureau of Economic Research suggests that bitcoin has developed its own group of one-percenters who will likely reap most of the gains in coming years.</p> <p>The NBER study found that the top 10,000 bitcoin investors own a combined 5 million bitcoins, or roughly \$230 billion's worth at recent prices. Those figures mean that, even though bitcoin launched in 2009, "participation in bitcoin is still very skewed toward a few top players even at the end of 2020," said finance experts Igor Makarov and Antoinette Schoar, who wrote the study.</p> <p>Those top players represent a mere 0.01% of all bitcoin holders and yet they control 27% of the digital currency, the Wall Street Journal reported. That compares to the old-fashion dollar, where the top 1% controlled 30% of total U.S. household wealth, according to Federal Reserve data.</p> <p>Makarov and Schoar said in their study there's a "significant skewness in ownership" in bitcoin and that "implies that the majority of the gains from further adoption are likely to fall disproportionately to a small set of participants."</p>

Bitcoin and other digital currencies have been at the center of many of this year's wildest financial gains and losses. Although considered a highly unstable form of money by most financial experts, bitcoin [reached new highs earlier this year](#), in part because more companies are accepting it as a form of payment.

The messaging service WhatsApp this month began piloting a new feature it said allows U.S. users to send money without paying fees, using cryptocurrency. The new payment service marks yet another example of how digital currencies are becoming more accepted in the [mainstream U.S. financial scene](#).

As their popularity rises, digital currencies have been the target of many multimillion dollar scams in recent history. Between January and July, crypto accounted for \$681 million in scam losses, according to a report from cryptocurrency intelligence firm CipherTrace.

Despite crypto's growing popularity, relatively few people own a large chunk of bitcoin, making the digital currency much more vulnerable to large price swings from week to week, Makarov and Schoar said in their study. Makarov and Schoar collected data from bitcoin's inception 13 years ago to the end of 2020, when there were roughly 15 million bitcoin in circulation. There are 19 million bitcoins currently in circulation, according to Blockchain.com [data](#). The maximum number of [bitcoins](#) that can ever exist is 21 million.

The study does not reveal the names of people who own the most bitcoin.

Still, Makarov and Schoar's work adds credibility to the lists floating around the internet of investors with the highest crypto fortunes. Matthew Roszak, chairman of blockchain company Bloq, has a crypto portfolio worth more than \$1.5 billion, Forbes [reported](#) in April. The Winklevoss twins [Cameron and Tyler also reportedly became billionaires from investing in bitcoin](#).

"Our results suggest that despite the significant attention that bitcoin has received over the last few years, the bitcoin ecosystem is still dominated by large and concentrated players, be it large miners, Bitcoin holders or exchanges," Makarov and Schoar concluded.

[Return to Top](#)

Terror Conditions

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 New jihadists and the Taliban model
SOURCE	https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/86049
GIST	<p>On September 15, 2021, Abd al-Rahim Atoun, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS): Organization for the Liberation of the Levant general jurist, gave a lecture organized by the HTS sponsored Salvation Government in the city of Idlib, titled "Jihad and Resistance in the Muslim World: The Taliban Model."</p> <p>Atoun, second in command to Abu Mohammad al-Julani, the leader of the group, appeared in the lecture in a modern outfit, abandoning the stereotypical image of the Jihadists, and focused his speech on the similarities between HTS and the Taliban. He focused on the changes adopted by the HTS to localize its Jihadist goals and to communicate with the west.</p> <p>HTS was formerly known as the Nusra Front, and was formed at the end of 2011, as a branch of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). By mid-2013, it broke its ties with ISI and pledged its allegiance to Al-Qaeda, and its leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri. In July 2016, Al-Julani ended its affiliation with Al Qaeda and changed its name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (The Front for the Conquest of the Levant). In 2017, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham rebranded yet again when it merged with several other militant groups to establish HTS. These organizational changes were unavoidably accompanied by shifts in the group's political goals and methods of action. The most important of these was that the group has established itself as a local player fighting in Syria to remove Assad's regime, completely independent from Al-Qaeda and its global Jihad ideology. The group also focused on establishing its dominance over the Northern areas, specifically the City of</p>

Idlib, by weakening and occasionally eliminating its rival groups. By early 2019, it had managed to take control of significant portions of Idlib and of the strategic Bab al-Hawa crossing it shares with Turkey, through which the majority of goods and aids pass.

PRAGMATISM AND POLITICAL MESSAGES

Among the most significant pragmatic transformations undertaken by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was the formation of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). The SSG's purpose was to consolidate its civilian administration over Idlib while substantiating the group's international and regional commitments. The HTS engaged in various rounds of negotiations with Turkey and, following the Astana Talks, it accepted the establishment of the observation posts that [the guarantors of the talks](#) (Russia, Turkey, and Iran) stipulated to keep track of the situation in Idlib.

HTS' security services widely targeted the remaining Islamic State (IS) groups in Idlib, [weakening](#) the Al-Qaeda affiliated Hurras al-Din movement and arresting some of its leaders in the process. The group also attacked smaller Jihadi factions composed primarily of foreign fighters, like [Jund al-Sham](#), and has requested them out of the city. These moves were clear indications that the HTS was yet again renewing its identity and redefining itself; this time as a Syrian group concerned with national liberation, rather than with transnational Jihad. Therefore, [according to Atoun](#), the West, and the United States (US) in particular, should cease to consider it a security threat.

It seems that the Taliban's model, as a local militant group, that has been recognized by some governments and succeeded in negotiating with the US and eventually took over Afghanistan has boosted morale for HTS who now expect to be accepted as a local group, capable of controlling and eliminating extremist Jihadi movements in Idlib. The shifts in HTS' vision and orientation can be explained by some factors, most importantly is the pragmatic objectives of its leaders, who may be wishing to capitalize on the Taliban experience. Additionally, by using the stick and carrot policy, Turkey has pressured the group to adopt new policies, especially in the wake of the Astana Talks.

The fact that HTS has chosen to reorient the group to have a local focus, and create a civil government, as well as adhere to the Astana decisions by expelling foreign fighters and preventing transnational Jihadist activity in areas it controls, emphasizes the group's hope for international recognition that could eventually assist in taking it off from the terrorists' lists. However, the political [messages](#) sent by Al-Julani to the US, and other countries in the west, regarding the HTS' desire to assume a new role, were ignored.

As HTS continues to control the city of Idlib, the last stronghold of rebels fighting al-Assad's regime with a population of more than [3.5 million civilians](#), it presents an international conundrum, particularly if the Russian backed Syrian regime decides to conduct a full-scale offensive on the city. Such an offensive is very likely to result in a humanitarian catastrophe, featuring an unprecedented number of refugees who will probably crowd the Turkish borders, triggering a level of involvement Ankara cannot afford. It may, therefore, be appropriate for regional and international parties involved to arrive at a solution that will avert such a disaster. It might therefore be better to adopt different approaches to prevent such a debacle.

Using the policy of the stick and carrot, the international community should nudge HTS and encourage more constructive behavior in regards to respecting the rights of minorities and supporting the work of civil society organizations in Idlib, in return for the restoration of the humanitarian and stabilization assistance to the city, and establishing direct communication channels with international stakeholders.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Guilty plea: intentional derailling of train
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/federal-pages/doj/train-engineer-pleads-guilty-to-terrorism-charge-for-intentionally-derailing-locomotive-over-covid-19-conspiracy-theory/
GIST	A train engineer at the Port of Los Angeles pleaded guilty today to a federal criminal charge for running a locomotive at full speed off the end of railroad tracks near a United States Navy hospital ship that was deployed to provide medical relief during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Eduardo Moreno, 45, of San Pedro, pleaded guilty to one count of committing a terrorist attack and other violence against railroad carriers and mass transportation systems.

According to his plea agreement, on March 31, 2020, Moreno drove a train at high speed, did not slow down near the end of the railroad track, and intentionally derailed the train off the tracks near the United States Naval Ship Mercy – a hospital ship then docked in the Port of Los Angeles.

No one was injured in the incident, and the Mercy was not harmed or damaged, according to court documents. The incident resulted in the train leaking a substantial amount of fuel, which required clean up by fire and other hazardous materials personnel.

Moreno admitted in his plea agreement that he caused approximately \$700,000 in damages because of the derailment.

In his first interview with the Los Angeles Port Police, Moreno acknowledged that he “did it,” saying that he was suspicious of the Mercy and believed it had an alternate purpose related to COVID-19 or a government takeover, according to an affidavit filed with a criminal complaint in this case. Moreno stated that he acted alone and had not pre-planned the attempted attack. While admitting to intentionally derailing and crashing the train, he said he knew it would bring media attention and “people could see for themselves,” referring to the Mercy, according to the affidavit.

In a second interview with FBI agents, Moreno stated that “he did it out of the desire to ‘wake people up,’” according to the affidavit. “Moreno stated that he thought that the Mercy was suspicious and did not believe ‘the ship is what they say it’s for.’”

United States District Judge Philip S. Gutierrez has scheduled a March 11, 2022 sentencing hearing, at which time Moreno will face a statutory maximum sentence of 20 years in federal prison.

The FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force and the Port of Los Angeles Police investigated this matter.

Assistant United States Attorneys Reema M. El-Amamy and Christine M. Ro of the Terrorism and Export Crimes Section and Trial Attorney Taryn Meeks of the Department of Justice’s Counterterrorism Section are prosecuting this case.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/21 France kills regional IS group leader
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/europe-africa-france-niger-paris-ad4c0540630fba5cd0186358620fa7be
GIST	<p>PARIS (AP) — The French army says it has “neutralized” a regional Islamic State group leader wanted in connection with the killing of seven aid workers, mostly French citizens, and a leading guide in a Niger giraffe park in August 2020.</p> <p>France’s Defense Ministry said Tuesday that, in cooperation with Nigerien authorities, operatives from France’s anti-insurgent force Operation Barkhane struck Soumana Boura, an Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) leader, in a fatal airstrike.</p> <p>The force located him in a ISGS sanctuary north of the town of Tillaberi, identifying his body following the operation.</p> <p>France claims Boura was among the perpetrators of the attack that occurred Aug. 9, 2020, in Kouré Park, Niger.</p> <p>The victims had been on a day of sightseeing Sunday when they were attacked just before noon, according to one of the aid groups they worked for, Paris-based NGO ACTED. An ambulance sent by the French military stationed in Niger found the bodies later in the day in their burned-out vehicle in the giraffe reserve, the group said.</p>

HEADLINE	12/21 Children used in deadly rampage for gold
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/21/africa/solhan-burkina-faso-massacre-intl-cmd/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)The men were shot as they slept outside, having spent their days underground, choking in the Sahel dust, digging and panning for gold.</p> <p>They were killed by children -- some apparently as young as 12 -- and men who had arrived on dozens of motorbikes and were egged on in their murderous spree by women who knew the village well, according to witnesses. The local militia had left. The army came to the rescue for a matter of hours in the morning but then left before dusk, letting the attackers return the following night to burn the village down and most likely steal what gold it had.</p> <p>In the end, somewhere between 170 and 200 people died, according to estimates by a local police source and other officials, and it still remains unclear who the killers were.</p> <p>The massacre in Solhan, northern Burkina Faso, took place over two nights of extraordinary brutality in June 2021. The killings soon faded from international headlines, absorbed into the rhythms of persistent violence in the Sahel region, an arid stretch of land sandwiched by the Sahara Desert and the African savannah, and wracked by the climate emergency.</p> <p>In the lawless and remote communities of the Sahel, jihadists increasingly hold sway. Yet one likely culprit in this incident, al Qaeda's local affiliate JNIM, condemned the attack's brutality. And the other main suspect, ISIS, chose to blame it on al Qaeda, according to an ISIS-affiliated newspaper.</p> <p>Dozens of interviews by CNN with survivors, local witnesses and Burkina Faso officials paint the most complete and disturbing narrative yet of a rampage perpetrated over 48 hours, partially by children, that the US-backed and trained Burkina Faso military was powerless to stop.</p> <p>Yet few officials or witnesses agree on a coherent and consistent motive for the attack. Were the child attackers sent for Solhan's gold, as currency for their Islamist masters? Was it a punishment killing ordered by jihadists against villagers loyal to the government?</p> <p>The story of Solhan is a notable mark in the patina of brutality spreading across the Sahel. The intervention -- and now ongoing drawdown -- of the French military, the arrival of European Union forces, and the Pentagon's sustained support mean billions have been spent in attempts to bolster the local security forces. Yet violence has spiraled instead, particularly in Burkina Faso over recent years.</p> <p>The crisis in some of sub-Saharan Africa's poorest states presents an imminent threat to Europe's security, and by extension the United States, analysts say, in providing a secure and spacious breeding ground for terror networks. US officials have described the "wildfire of terrorism" in the Sahel, with al Qaeda and ISIS "on the march" in West Africa, aiming to "carve out a new caliphate."</p> <p>Illicit gold has emerged as a key source of funding for jihadist groups, who have been seizing so-called "informal mines" -- small-scale mining sites which rely largely on physical labor and basic technology to extract precious metals and minerals -- in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger since 2016, according to a Crisis Group report from 2019.</p> <p>Bachir Ismael Ouédraogo, Burkina Faso's minister of energy and mines, told CNN the country lost 20 tons of gold through informal mining and exports every year, worth roughly \$1 billion on the open market.</p> <p>Ouédraogo describes it as a "war economy," a system that uses well-coordinated routes across the African continent. "The gold you end up buying is financing terrorism, and affecting our families here," he added.</p> <p>The first night: Massacre</p>

Trapped in the arid plains around 400 kilometers (250 miles) northeast of the capital Ouagadougou, Solhan's gold is the village's only asset, and its curse.

Satellite images of the village show the damage that informal mining has done to the terracotta soil -- the charred grey tailings and spoil from the intense activity of men who spend so many hours digging underground that they must sleep outdoors to recover.

A local government-backed militia called the VDP (a French acronym meaning Volunteers for the Defense of the Country) provides some security. Yet on the night of June 4, Solhan was left mostly defenseless.

More than 100 jihadists, on dozens of tricycles and motorbikes, had been spotted 20 kilometers (12 miles) from Solhan that afternoon, according to Boureima Ly, the emir of the local region of Yagha.

The army was warned of a possible attack, but it was unclear if it would target Solhan or nearby Sebba -- according to Aly Bokoum, an activist with the Sahel Regional Youth Council in Burkina Faso -- so the local unit chose to stay in Sebba, where it is based. The VDP in Solhan also contacted the army about the threat but were told to leave the village, according to Bokoum.

CNN has made multiple attempts to contact Burkina Faso's army for comment.

Gold appeared to set the attackers' priorities. Mines at Mousiga, a tiny settlement to Solhan's east, were hit first, according to a mining official and a miner who were present. Many of the survivors, witnesses and officials requested anonymity for their safety.

"Their faces were hidden with scarves," the miner said of the assailants. "There were many of them on bikes and they started shooting. I started running for my life -- for 30 kilometers, all night, to safety." This miner said he did not see children among this group and two other officials denied the involvement of children at the Mousiga mines.

The distant gunfire from Mousiga was misinterpreted by the Solhan miners, who "thought it was the army coming" on a routine patrol and so "stayed next to their wells," said the mining official. The attackers then hit a VDP base on the road into the village, before moving on to their main target.

On entering Solhan, the convoy of children, women and likely some men split. One group turned left towards the mines. Another drove calmly into the center of the village.

The first shots in Solhan, heard by witnesses at 2:08 a.m., were at the mines, the police source said. "The gold-diggers were first ... ambushed ... killed at random," he said, while describing the typical night-time scene. "Most of the [miners] sleep outside, on site. They can't sleep indoors, and they don't go home either. Usually only a few of them get into the well late at night, and most come out because of the heat."

One miner said some victims were shot dead as they slept outside and others were slaughtered as they worked, trapped underground. "All [the attackers] found outside were people sleeping," he said. "That's what made it possible for them to massacre them like that."

Another miner said: "People started coming out of the pits and running ... running for our lives." He added that others hid inside the 30-foot-deep wells.

The mining official described how a large gun was positioned beneath a nearby tree for use in the attack. "Many ran away, but when you run, you're going to be seen and they shoot," he said, adding that some miners survived by hiding in the pits until 8 a.m. "The first person who went down to the site [the following day] called me, and said the bodies were lying like fish," the official said.

Several witnesses and officials told CNN that the attackers had in-depth knowledge of Solhan's layout.

"These are people who take the time to study their target," confirmed the police source, who said witnesses mentioned distinctly hearing women's voices among the attackers. "They indicated to 'go to into this guy's house, do this and that,' and told children to 'go here and there,' that they couldn't let one person leave," the source said.

Local activist Abdou Hoeffi, from the human rights group Burkina Faso Movement for Human and People's Rights (MBDHP), said the women played a cheerleading role with the child assailants, with shouts of: "You are a good shooter! You go!"

One witness, who said his parents were killed in the attack, told CNN in Solhan: "They came with women and little children holding guns. Francois, a shopkeeper, he was taken away, my friend. If it was a man, they killed him -- a boy, they kidnapped him. A little one like that," he said, gesturing the embrace of an infant in his arms, "who was breastfeeding [was taken away]. His mother lost her mind."

One Solhan woman, her bright blue dress glistening as she sifted grains through a sieve, described surviving the night: "They destroyed everything ... I fled into my house with my child on my back ... I couldn't sleep all night. We saw the light from the bullets all over the place ... It was only God who saved us, otherwise they were going to exterminate us all."

Another witness said he and his wife were in bed with their 5-day-old baby when they heard the gunfire. "Three terrorists passed by my house, in front of me, talking. They did not stop. I could see the bullets raining down everywhere in the night." The witness, a former security guard for the local cellphone antenna, said the attackers disabled the phone mast that night and removed its battery, cutting the village off from the outside world and a chance of help.

The attackers left at dawn, and the same witness said that the villagers started to venture outside again by 5 a.m. "I couldn't count the number of corpses that were on the side of the road," he recalled. "Everywhere you go, there are bodies lying around."

The mine was also an apocalyptic scene. "We found that everyone died at the well. I made up to eight trips with a motorcycle cab to carry corpses," said another survivor." The mining official added that "everyone was loaded on and off the motorbikes like bags of grain."

Then the army finally arrived. One miner told CNN the attackers depended on the military's slow reaction when launching their assault. "This is Burkina Faso. There is no fast response," the miner said. "If they knew that in 30 or 40 minutes the army would come, they wouldn't [attack]. But they took all their time."

When the military did arrive, there was little to do but bury the dead, he said. "They dug a big hole. There was no other solution."

The ex-phone antenna guard said the security forces asked villagers "to go back home and lock the door, and to not hide any terrorists."

Two officials said the militants' convoy did not really leave at first light but instead relocated to a hideout in the brush, and waited. The mining official specified a remote border area where he believed they had hidden. The police source said it was not clear if they met leaders there for further instructions, or just waited for the cover of night.

Some of the villagers who remained in Solhan tried to flee, said the police source. "They didn't know if it was over or not," he said. The hospital in the nearest city, Dori, was "overwhelmed," he said. But it was unclear if the attackers were finished with Solhan. At dusk, the answer came.

The second night: Destruction

"I heard the sound of their motorcycles and said, 'Ah, they are [here] again,'" one witness said. "I went back to my yard, turned off the lights in my house, took my mat, took my blanket." He said he left for

another village -- traveling on foot with a group of Solhan's children, elderly residents and pregnant women.

But the convoy's focus was different this time: They wanted to eradicate or loot all that remained. "They started to burn. They entered the houses," said one survivor. "At the stores, they took clothes, drinks, money, put them in their vehicles."

"They came back, they found four motorcycles at our place," another survivor said. "They burned everything. They burned all our houses, until even the sheet metal was gone. They took rice, sugar, oil and boxes of other things."

Showing a cameraman around what remained of his home, the survivor gestured to the devastation -- the walls black with soot, apart from a patch where the TV was fixed before it too was looted. "The grenade went through the wall and went to the other side," he said, pointing at a missing patch of plaster. "The whole roof is gone."

The mining official said 80 sheep were also slaughtered in the violence.

Young men who survived the onslaught sought medication for the psychological trauma in nearby Dori, he added. "They were given pills or injections, because they say they couldn't close their eyes, because they could still see the dead bodies."

Video filmed in July shows the charred village clinic -- the hospital beds and consultation room beyond use. Shops and homes were incinerated, and rows of buildings left collapsed or with only their metal gates remaining. Motorcycles were torched. Even the mining machinery used to break rocks was half-smashed, yet in the video some of it still hummed around the mines that remained functioning.

Shell casings still lay on the ground. The scale of destruction -- fueled, it seemed, by something more nihilistic than just looting -- surprised some officials.

Since June, officials, experts and survivors have been seeking to understand more about the massacre. The government, facing protests in Dori over its inaction and security failings, blamed jihadists.

Government spokesperson Ousseni Tamboura told Radio France Internationale that two suspects had been detained before the attack and the arrests had led officials to link it to a little-known group called Mujahed al Qaeda, which is connected to the al Qaeda affiliate JNIM. Tamboura said gold was also a motivating factor. In the immediate aftermath, the government fired some security personnel and declared three days of national mourning.

Tamboura told CNN in November the government believes al Qaeda affiliate JNIM was behind the massacre. He put the death toll at 132, which includes attackers killed in the incident, and fatalities from a neighboring attack.

Tamboura declined to comment on the army's absence in Solhan that night, and said that the Burkina Faso military followed all protocols set between them and the US as a condition for aid. The spokesman added that the jihadi groups were fueled by hunger to control resources, not by ideology.

A French military intelligence official, who didn't want to be named discussing sensitive information, agreed that jihadists were likely responsible, saying the massacre was likely committed by a group "in the process of being formed," linked to JNIM. The official said attacks against the general population, as indiscriminate as those on Solhan, were more the hallmark of ISIS, however.

Display of violence

Beds inside the local health clinic were burnt.

The display of violence has once again highlighted the rapid deterioration of social structures and security in the Sahel region.

A US intelligence official said: "There is absolutely a continued need for Western involvement and engagement to address the expansion of the al Qaeda- and ISIS-based groups in the area and not give them complete freedom of movement -- as well as to build [the] capability [and] capacity of African partners."

The US official added that the crisis seemed to be fueled by local partnerships between jihadists and not an influx of ISIS fighters from the collapse of the former ISIS caliphate in Iraq and Syria. They said that they have not noticed a broad trend of ISIS fighters moving from the Middle East to the Sahel area, with the exception of one or two persons of interest.

The official said the main concern was how ISIS affiliates across Africa were able to share tactics and build each other's capabilities.

"Whether it's physical facilitation capabilities from a group like ISIS Somalia with more skilled fighters [or] better media coordination from other groups, and being able to rapidly disseminate those capabilities more widely ... it is hugely concerning," they explained. "You could take a group that is probably not very effective and make them very effective quickly, if they're able to leverage some of that skill set."

In Burkina Faso and its Sahel neighbors Mali and Niger, armed Islamist groups have killed more than 800 civilians in attacks during 2021 alone, [according to Human Rights Watch](#).

Three days of mourning was declared in Burkina Faso after an August attack in the village of Gorgadji, about 50 kilometers west of Dori, where [militants killed 80 people, reported Agence France-Presse](#). Fourteen soldiers were reportedly ambushed and killed in October near Yirgou, also in the north, the site of a similar attack that killed 15 police in June, [according to Reuters](#).

Gunmen killed dozens of people in another massacre in Yirgou in 2019, [according to Amnesty International](#).

This rise in violence has occurred despite the US's enduring, low-profile military mission in Burkina Faso, which pumped in tens of millions of dollars in aid during 2018-19.

Dozens of advisers are [reported to mentor elements of the country's military](#), while a [US embassy factsheet](#) said the US has trained and equipped 3,000 soldiers and gendarmes.

Yet significant swathes of Burkina Faso's volatile north remain outside of the government's control. Long-running accusations of abuses by the military have also complicated its relationship with its key military backers, specifically France and the US.

Human rights organizations also face difficulties in Burkina Faso. The government [suspended the operations of the Norwegian Refugee Council](#) in September after the humanitarian group noted the country's speed at registering displaced people.

For the police source, however, the massacre at Solhan was particularly methodical and unparalleled in its brutality. "These are people who take the time to study their target," he said. "It is painful to see a woman instructing a child to kill such and such. Painful."

And for the survivors, the initial absence of the army, as well as its departure as night fell, are indications of the dark place they live in.

"If the [army] are not with the people, how is that possible?," one survivor said. "As soon as the army left, [the attackers] came again. This is a strange country. It's a strange country."

HEADLINE	12/20 Charge: Kentucky man joined ISIS
SOURCE	https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/kentucky-man-allegedly-joined-terror-group-returned-face-charges-rcna9447
GIST	<p>A Kentucky man who is accused of joining the Islamic State group, designated a terrorist organization by the U.S., made his initial court appearance Monday as part of a federal case that accuses him of assisting the group, prosecutors said.</p> <p>The man, Mirsad Hariz Adem Ramic, 31, of Bowling Green, is charged with providing material support and conspiring to provide material support to a terrorist organization. He is also charged with receiving military training from such a foe.</p> <p>It wasn't clear whether Ramic had an attorney. A federal public defender's office that serves Kentucky didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.</p> <p>A federal court in Kentucky unsealed the indictment Monday, the Justice Department said in a statement.</p> <p>Ramic, a dual citizen of the U.S. and Bosnia, is alleged to have left the U.S. for Istanbul in 2014. Traveling with two unnamed co-conspirators, prosecutors said, the trio eventually crossed into Syria to join the terrorist group, better known as ISIS.</p> <p>Ramic attended fighter training, in which he fired an AK-47, relocated to Raqqa, Syria, and used an anti-aircraft weapon "to shoot at planes," prosecutors alleged in the Justice Department's statement.</p> <p>He and the alleged co-conspirators discussed jihad, or holy war, martyrdom and fighting for the Islamic State group, the Justice Department said.</p> <p>The FBI has photos of Ramic in Islamic State group territory, prosecutors said. At least one features him in camouflage, standing in front of an Islamic State group-marked pickup truck that was carrying an anti-aircraft gun, according to the Justice Department statement.</p> <p>Another photo shows him holding a rifle, the Justice Department said.</p> <p>One of the co-conspirators had twice emailed Western Kentucky University to say Ramic had traveled to Syria and joined the Islamic State group and now wanted its fighters to "conquer" the U.S., the Justice Department statement says.</p> <p>The reason wasn't clear. The university didn't immediately respond to a request for information about possible connections Ramic may have had to the school.</p> <p>Ramic was held in Turkey for an undisclosed amount of time before he was deported to the U.S., where he arrived Thursday night, prosecutors said.</p> <p>If he is convicted, he could be sentenced to as long as 50 years in prison, face as much as \$750,000 in fines and be subject to a maximum of lifetime supervision if he is released, they said.</p>
Return to Top	

Suspicious, Unusual

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Study: melting Arctic link to fall fire weather
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/study-draws-link-between-melting-arctic-ice-and-western-u-s-fires-that-flare-in-the-fall/

Melting Arctic sea ice appears to be having far-reaching atmospheric impacts that increase the likelihood of extreme fall fire weather in the western United States, according to a study that used a mix of data analysis and computer modeling to draw this link.

The [peer-reviewed research](#), funded by the federal Energy Department, was published in the journal *Nature Communications* and presented Thursday at the annual conference of the American Geophysical Union.

The authors say in summers with strong Arctic ice melt, the warmer sea temperatures result in more heat rising into the atmosphere. This creates a powerful [vortex of winds](#) circling counterclockwise, which can nudge the jet stream out of its typical pattern. This can bring drier air to the Western U.S., and prime fire conditions.

“Climate conditions in one part of the world can, over time, influence climate outcomes from thousands of kilometers away,” said Hailong Wang, an earth scientist at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in Richland, and one of four co-authors of the paper. “In our case, we find the Arctic region and the western United States are connected by this relationship. Regional land and sea ice warming caused by sea loss ... triggers hotter and drier conditions in the West later in the year.”

The study covered a four-decade period when Arctic Sea ice has been in decline in a northern realm that has been warming more than twice as fast as the rest of the Earth.

The surface air temperatures over the Arctic for the 12-month period ending September 2021 ranked as the seventh warmest on record. This was the eighth consecutive year that temperatures were at least 1 degree Celsius (1.8 degrees Fahrenheit) above the long-term average, according to an [“Arctic Report Card”](#) released this month by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The study that Wang co-authored is part of a broader wave of research attempting to improve understanding of the impacts of the dramatic Arctic warming.

In a 2015 research article, Elizabeth Barnes of Colorado State University and James Screen of the University of Exeter wrote that it was still “an open question whether Arctic changes have an effect on the jet stream and thereby influence weather patterns farther south. This broad question has recently received a lot of scientific and media attention, but conclusions appear contradictory rather than consensual.”

That debate still continues.

Nick Bond, a University of Washington atmospheric scientist and the state’s climatologist, said the paper by Wang and his colleagues is based on solid research and “an interesting piece of work.” But Bond said the evidence they presented does not persuade him that there is a strong Arctic influence on Western fire weather. “I personally am not going to necessarily count on sea ice for expectations on what our fire reasons are going to be around here.”

Bond said that other climate models show a warming climate will be drying out the Northwest, and he hopes that this study will help spur additional research to investigate the relationships between the Arctic and the Western fire seasons.

Wang and his colleagues say the strongest correlations result from comparing Western fall fire seasons in six cool Arctic years that had the most summer sea ice with the six warmest years in the study period. This analysis, which covers California, Oregon and part of Washington, shows increases in the probability and intensity of fires.

The study suggests that, in the decades ahead, as the sea ice continues to retreat, the changing patterns of circulation will continue to escalate the late-season fire risks.

	<p>Wang said that it also is possible that melting Arctic sea ice could impact summer weather in the West, including events such as the heat dome that led to record June temperatures in British Columbia, Washington and Oregon. His research indicates that when the jet stream is pushed off course, a second vortex, spinning clockwise, can form that brings clear skies and dry condition similar to those during the summer heat wave.</p> <p>But Wang said that it is too soon to draw any link, and that more research is needed in this area.</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 Cursing more? Blame the #%%\$ pandemic
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/were-cursing-more-blame-the-pandemic-11640008801?mod=hp_listc_pos2
GIST	<p>In November, Jay Rosenthal unexpectedly found himself uttering a curse word—at his children’s school.</p> <p>He’s on the board there, and he and some fellow board members were touring impressive new classrooms for the first time. “Holy shit!” he exclaimed.</p> <p>It’s not language he would have used before the pandemic. But he says the two-year slog has pulled his guard down and made him more casual in many of his interactions. Part of it is Zoom, he says: He has spent hours in virtual meetings with co-workers and school board members, staring into people’s kitchens and living rooms while their pets and children walk by. The old boundaries between work and home have blurred, reducing formalities and often forging foxhole bonds during difficult times.</p> <p>“Artificial walls came down,” says Mr. Rosenthal, a Toronto-based founder of a media company.</p> <p>Pandemic stress, the melding of personal and professional spheres, and an exhausted slide toward casualness are making many of us swear more. It is “a perfect swearing storm,” says Michael Adams, a linguist at Indiana University Bloomington.</p> <p>Mentions of f—, shit and asshole, or related variations, rose 41% from full-year 2019 to 2021 through the end of November on Facebook and 27% on Twitter, according to Storyful, a news and intelligence agency. Storyful is owned by News Corp, the parent company of The Wall Street Journal.</p> <p>Denver-based Inversoft Inc.’s CleanSpeak profanity-filtering software, which is used by companies that host online communities and other discussion forums, says the volume of filtered words has more than tripled in the past 18 months.</p> <p>“People are becoming more aggressive in their use of profane and sexually explicit terms,” says Inversoft’s Chief Executive Don Bergal.</p> <p>Swearing can activate a natural defense against pain, says Richard Stephens, a psychologist at Keele University in the U.K. who has studied the effect of emotional language on pain management. His 2009 study found that undergraduates were able to submerge their hands in ice water for 40 seconds longer, on average, when they uttered a curse word of their choice repeatedly. By arousing part of the nervous system and elevating the heart rate, cursing induces a stimulation, he says, that can have a pain-alleviating effect.</p> <p>Dropping a curse word here and there can also demonstrate comfort with someone else. “It’s something you’re not supposed to be doing, but you trust them,” says Dr. Adams. “It’s a sign of intimacy.” He says people are seeking this type of connection as they experience tectonic life shifts while often feeling isolated from their colleagues. “We’re using what we’ve got,” he says.</p> <p>Tracy Brady, a communications executive in Boston who has found herself swearing more during the pandemic, likens the relaxing of language to a parallel relaxation of how we dress now.</p>

Cursing “is the yoga pants and Uggs of language,” says Ms. Brady.

During a recent work call from home, Ms. Brady overheard her two teenage sons squabbling in the kitchen about a takeout order. The 13-year-old accused the 14-year-old of having forgotten a condiment on purpose. “What the f—,” said one. “You’re such a f—ing asshole,” said the other.

Ms. Brady ran upstairs to break up the fight, intending to reprimand the children about swearing.

Instead, she blurted out: “What the f— is going on here?” she says. “I came running to yell at them about swearing, but then slipped.”

Ms. Brady says she also relies more on cursing now as a way to bond and laugh with other colleagues and parents during stressful times. During a virtual back-to-school night recently, she sat through a presentation on navigating student schedules virtually.

Befuddled, she texted two other parents: “Does anyone else feel like a f—ing moron?”

Some career experts say that cursing still is questionable in work settings. Executive speech coach Diane DiResta cautions against using profanity at the office. “It’s too risky,” she says, partly because what sounds acceptable to one person’s ears may be offensive to someone else, and it is sometimes hard to toe that line.

Yet swearing can convey a kind of grittiness, or an appealing edge, say branding experts.

“If it’s used judiciously, it can be a spotlight, an exclamation point, a way to break out and seem authentic,” says Allen Adamson, co-founder of brand-consulting firm Metaforce. Yet too much swearing can undercut the substance of the speaker’s message, he adds.

In Toronto, Mr. Rosenthal sits on a couple of boards, and says he is no longer censoring his language during board conversations. “It is more expressive sometimes. And it’s how people genuinely talk to each other.”

Amy Platt, head of school for the Paul Penna Downtown Jewish Day School, witnessed the moment Mr. Rosenthal uttered the swear word in front of the other board members. She says she wasn’t put off. Touring the building “was a deeply exciting and emotional moment,” she says.

Roxana Lissa, a managing director for an advertising agency in Los Angeles, says she and her colleagues are communicating in a faster and more relaxed way over Microsoft Teams while working from home during the pandemic. The quicker, more casual tone means more swearing in some cases, she says.

By her own count, she has typed the word “shit” more than 50 times to colleagues in messages over the last eight months on Teams, she says. (Over email, she says, where her notes are more thoughtfully composed, she exhibits restraint.)

On Nov. 9, she wrote to colleague Jonathan Hastings, a director of business development, about a new business pitch: “I need help putting this shit together.” He agreed and suggested that two other colleagues pitch in.

Mr. Hastings says he wasn’t offended. “If I’m being honest, I probably didn’t even notice,” he says. Now that colleagues are meeting from their kitchens or dens rather than a conference room or an office, an “office filter has been taken down,” he says.

[Return to Top](#)

SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/himalayan-glaciers-are-melting-at-furious-rate-new-study-shows-11639994402?mod=hp_featst_pos3
GIST	<p>Glaciers across the Himalayas are melting at an extraordinary rate, with new research showing that the vast ice sheets there shrank 10 times faster in the past 40 years than during the previous seven centuries.</p> <p>Avalanches, flooding and other effects of the accelerating loss of ice imperil residents in India, Nepal and Bhutan and threaten to disrupt agriculture for hundreds of millions of people across South Asia, according to the researchers. And since water from melting glaciers contributes to sea-level rise, glacial ice loss in the Himalayas also adds to the threat of inundation and related problems faced by coastal communities around the world.</p> <p>“This part of the world is changing faster than perhaps anybody realized,” said Jonathan Carrivick, a University of Leeds glaciologist and the co-author of a paper detailing the research published Monday in the journal Scientific Reports. “It’s not just that the Himalayas are changing really fast, it’s that they’re changing ever faster.”</p> <p>Scientists have long observed ice loss from large glaciers in New Zealand, Greenland, Patagonia and other parts of the world. But ice loss in the Himalayas is especially rapid, the new study found. The researchers didn’t pinpoint a reason but noted that regional climate factors, such as shifts in the South Asian monsoon, may play a role.</p> <p>The new finding comes as there is scientific consensus that ice loss from glaciers and polar ice sheets results from rising global temperatures caused by greenhouse-gas emissions from the burning of fossil fuels.</p> <p>Many peer-reviewed scientific studies have identified human activity as a cause of rising global temperatures. So did a report issued in August by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which said “human influence is very likely the main driver of the global retreat of glaciers since the 1990s.”</p> <p>For the new study, Dr. Carrivick and his colleagues scanned satellite photos of almost 15,000 glaciers in the region for signs of the large ridges of rock and debris that glaciers leave behind as they slowly grind their way through the valleys. Using the locations of these ancient glacial tracks, the scientists estimated the span of ice sheet coverage in previous centuries.</p> <p>Then they compared that with the present ice cover to arrive at an estimate of how much ice had been lost since a period of global cooling between 400 and 700 years ago, known as the Little Ice Age. The estimate: between 390 and 586 cubic kilometers of ice—enough to raise global sea levels 0.92 to 1.38 millimeters, or about 1/20th of an inch.</p> <p>Summer Rupper, a professor of geography at the University of Utah, called the centurieslong record of Himalayan ice loss resulting from the new research “absolutely critical.” The record will help scientists develop more accurate forecasts of glacial change and sea level rise in coming decades, she said. The new study stands out from previous efforts because of “the sheer number of glaciers that they did this with,” she added.</p> <p>In addition to floods, rising sea levels can cause soil erosion and jeopardize the structural integrity of roads and bridges as well as power plants and other critically important industrial facilities located in coastal areas. In the U.S. as of 2014, almost 40% of the population live in coastal areas that are likely to be affected by these changes in coming years, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.</p> <p>“There’s lots of different parts to sea level rise, but mountain glaciers historically and probably in the coming decades have been the most significant contributors,” Dr. Rupper said.</p> <p>The impacts of ice loss in the Himalayan region could be especially stark.</p>

[Meltwater](#) from the glaciers in the region feeds major rivers that support India's vast northern agricultural belt. As the glaciers continue to shrink, the availability of water for irrigation and drinking water could drop steeply, according to the researchers. And avalanches could become common, as ice loss renders slopes more unstable.

"The implication of our findings is that if the mass loss is accelerating, then it only heightens the importance of being able to mitigate this on the ground," Dr. Carrivick said.

Between 1994 and 2017, [the Earth lost enough ice](#) to cover the state of Michigan with a sheet 100 meters thick, according to a study published in January in the journal The Cryosphere.

Mountain glaciers are expected to vanish completely in some regions by 2100, according to [some recent studies](#).

[Return to Top](#)

Crime, Criminals

[Top of page](#)

HEADLINE	12/21 Secret Service: pandemic fraud near \$100B
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/21/secret-service-says-pandemic-fraud-totals-nearly-1/
GIST	<p>The U.S. Secret Service said Tuesday that fraudulent coronavirus pandemic benefit claims are "nearing \$100 billion," and the agency named its first-ever national coordinator to oversee its investigations.</p> <p>It's been nearly two years since the virus first slammed into the U.S., and Uncle Sam has spent trillions of dollars on relief, including assistance to businesses, bailout money for state and local governments, and new unemployment benefits.</p> <p>The Secret Service, which polices financial crimes, says it was primarily concerned in the early days with protective equipment fraud, but as fraudulent benefit claims build up it is time to refocus.</p> <p>The agency said it has more than 900 active criminal investigations into pandemic fraud.</p> <p>"Every state has been hit, some harder than others. The Secret Service is hitting the ground running, trying to recover everything we can, including funds stolen from both federal and state programs," said Roy Dotson, the assistant special agent in charge who was named coordinator.</p> <p>The agency also acknowledged the scope of the fraud, saying the massive amount of cash "has attracted the attention of individuals and organized criminal networks worldwide."</p> <p>At nearly \$100 billion, the Secret Service's estimates of total fraud are lower than others have suggested.</p> <p>The Washington Times last month reported that 40% of the more than \$700 billion spent in the unemployment insurance benefit program may have been bogus, and \$175 billion of that likely went to overseas actors. Of that, \$140 billion went to syndicates that have state backing from the likes of China or Russia, according to Haywood Talcove, CEO for LexisNexis Risk Solutions' government division.</p> <p>Republicans on Capitol Hill have started a probe into the extent of fraud and who's perpetrating it.</p> <p>The pandemic benefits were created by Congress at a time when the country's economy appeared on the brink of collapse, with mandated shutdown orders drying up customers and closing businesses.</p> <p>Lawmakers figured the need to get money out the door trumped the need for identity screens, making it relatively easy for bogus applications to be filed and approved.</p>

Return to Top	<p>The chief targets for fraudsters were the unemployment benefit program and two business-focused programs, the Paycheck Protection Program and a set of emergency loans, both aimed at helping companies stay afloat during the pandemic shutdowns.</p> <p>In the unemployment sphere, the standard fraud involved pilfering names and personal information, then applying for benefits under those stolen identities.</p> <p>Fraudsters then laundered money, or it shipped it outside the U.S., making it difficult to track down or recover.</p> <p>Mr. Dotson said that money-moving is a primary concern. In many cases, fraudsters are using romance fraud schemes, where they prey on people looking for companionship and get them to open up accounts that are then used to funnel money.</p> <p>“As a result, people are becoming unwitting mules for stolen money,” Mr. Dotson said.</p> <p>The agency said it has won more than \$2.3 billion in returned money by reversing electronic payments.</p>
-------------------------------	---

HEADLINE	12/20 Spokane PD chief suspends anti-crime team
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/news/local/spokane-police-anti-crime-team-suspended/293-98976fcd-9fff-4df7-9cca-b0db33686622
GIST	<p>SPOKANE, Wash. — Spokane Police Chief Craig Meidl suspended the department’s anti-crime team and reassigned its officers after a federal judge dismissed a drug trafficking case over inaccurate statements made by arresting officers.</p> <p>The Spokane Police Patrol Anti-Crime Team (PACT) was created in 2011 to “address emerging crime trends and prolific offenders.” Now, all 10 officers on the team have been reassigned to patrol duty due in part to the actions of two officers.</p> <p>Senior U.S. District Court Judge Rosanna Peterson dismissed the case against Jody Wallethe, who was accused of drug trafficking, on Dec. 16 after granting a motion to suppress evidence, according to federal court documents.</p> <p>Wallethe was arrested on March 3, 2021 and accused of distributing fentanyl and “Mexi-blues.”</p> <p>Court documents say Peterson decided to suppress evidence collected by Spokane Police Officers Scott Lesser and Winston Brooks after the defense argued that the affidavits for multiple search warrants in the case “contained false or misleading statements.”</p> <p>Spokane Police provided the following statement following the judge’s decision: <i>"SPD is aware of the concerns expressed by a federal judge regarding an investigation by members of PACT. We take these concerns very seriously and have launched an internal investigation. This court ruling serves to allow us to pause and take a deeper look at what we want our pro-active policing to look like. The nature of police work has and is continually changing and this step of reassigning PACT members gives SPD the opportunity to assess the role of the police anti-crime team."</i></p> <p>According to court documents, Lesser used a confidential informant, who was previously arrested for possessing heroin and meth, to buy fentanyl at a home in northeast Spokane in late February 2021. Lesser had the informant do multiple controlled drug buys that eventually helped his efforts in getting search warrants for Wallethe, documents say.</p> <p>Documents say Lesser gave the informant a number he believed belonged to Wallethe to set up a buy, but Lesser later said he didn't confirm the subscriber information for the phone number.</p>

Officer Brooks testified that he identified Wallette at the scene of the drug buy, even though handwritten notes from the officers didn't confirm Wallette was at the scene and it was dark outside.

Documents also say receipts and cellphone data show Wallette in Bellevue at the time of the buy.

Wallette was arrested 10 days after the drug deal, documents say. Judge Peterson ruled that the arrest was made without probable cause. The judge decided to suppress Lesser and Brooks' evidence on Dec. 6 and threw out Wallette's case 10 days later.

Spokane police spokesperson Julie Humphreys said the department launched an Internal Affairs investigation into the arrest following the judge's ruling.

Lesser was also investigated by the department for a [controversial arrest in February 2019](#). He was named in a lawsuit filed by Lucas Ellerman, who was subject of the arrest, that claims he and fellow officer Daniel Lesser entrapped Ellerman's car against a snow bank after a vehicle pursuit. All three officers involved in his arrest were not in violation of the departments use-of-force policy.

This isn't the first time the PACT has been accused of discrepancies between handwritten notes and official records.

Court documents show former Spokane Police Detective Lonnie Tofsrud filed a lawsuit in October 2019 that claims he pointed out discrepancies between an official report and the notes from PACT members Corporal Jeffrey McCollough and Sgt. Kurt Vigessa for the arrest of a confidential informant in 2017. According to the lawsuit, Tofsrud called McCollough and asked him to address the inconsistencies because it could cause problems for the prosecutor's office due to Brady list implications. [A Brady list](#) is a prosecutor's roster of officers whose conduct means their credibility could be challenged as witnesses in criminal cases.

Tofsrud told McCollough he would be reaching out to the prosecutor's office the next day for guidance, which ultimately led to the case against the informant being dismissed, court documents said.

Tofsrud was later reprimanded in June 2018 for going outside the chain of command for not going to internal affairs first. Then, court documents allege an Internal Affairs investigation into Tofsrud determined he knowingly made false statements to harm another department member's reputation. Tofsrud was then placed on the Brady list, making him unable to testify in court and was placed on desk duty.

In 2019, Tofsrud filed a lawsuit for damages in federal court over claims of retaliation. A judge later dismissed the case.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Separate shootings in Tacoma: 2 dead
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/two-dead-separate-shootings-tacoma/GGK3VDXI7RFX7NGAK53CD57XAA/
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. — Police are investigating after two people were fatally shot in separate incidents in Tacoma.</p> <p>In the first shooting on Sunday night, police were called to the 9100 block of South Alaska Street at about 9:14 p.m.</p> <p>When officers arrived at the scene, they found an unresponsive teenager and performed lifesaving measures until medics arrived.</p> <p>He was taken to the hospital where he was pronounced dead, police said.</p> <p>Police did not share the age of the victim.</p> <p>It is not yet known what led to the shooting.</p>

	<p>Police said they don't have any suspect information.</p> <p>The second shooting happened a few blocks away at an apartment complex on South 93rd Street near South Ash Street shortly before 12:30 a.m. Monday.</p> <p>Tacoma police were called to reports of gunshots and arrived to find a man dead inside a car in the parking lot.</p> <p>Police set up a wide perimeter there and crime scene technicians are combing the area for clues.</p> <p>No suspect information has been released.</p> <p>It is not yet known if the shootings are related. Both are being investigated as homicides.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/20 Seattle man jailed 46mo. Capitol riot role
SOURCE	https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/pr/seattle-man-sentenced-46-months-prison-assaulting-law-enforcement-during-capitol-breach
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON – A Washington State man was sentenced today to 46 months in prison for assaulting law enforcement during the breach of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, which disrupted a joint session of the U.S. Congress that was in the process of ascertaining and counting the electoral votes related to the presidential election.</p> <p>According to court documents, Devlyn Thompson, 28, of Seattle, was among individuals in a crowd on the Lower West Terrace of the Capitol who were pushing against and assaulting Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) and U.S. Capitol Police (USCP) officers in the tunnel leading into the U.S. Capitol. Thompson and others in the tunnel yelled obscenities at police and encouraged the continued assault. Thompson was part of a group that threw objects and projectiles at the officers, including flag poles, and grabbed and stole the officers' riot shields to prevent them from defending themselves against the violence.</p> <p>At approximately 2:21 p.m., Thompson personally observed police order rioters to stop, physically push the crowd back, and deploy pepper spray in an effort to try to stop the ongoing assault. Later, Thompson entered a tunnel on the West Front Terrace that led to an entrance to the U.S. Capitol, where members of Congress were sheltering in place. Thompson joined rioters in that tunnel and assisted other rioters in their assault of officers by helping them seize and use stolen law enforcement shields for approximately 13 minutes. Thompson also helped throw a large speaker at the front line of officers, and he later picked up a metal baton from the floor of the tunnel and swung it overhead and downward against the police line in an apparent effort to knock a can of pepper spray from an officer's hand and stop the officer from pepper-spraying the rioters. After more pepper spray was deployed by the rioters and the officers, Thompson retreated from the archway area.</p> <p>Thompson pleaded guilty on Aug. 6, in the District of Columbia, to assaulting, resisting or impeding officers while using a dangerous weapon. Thompson was arrested on that same date and has been in custody ever since. Judge Royce C. Lamberth also ordered him today to pay \$2,000 in restitution. He also must serve a period of three years of supervised release following completion of his prison term.</p> <p>The case was prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia and the Justice Department's National Security Division. Valuable assistance was provided by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Western District of Washington.</p> <p>The FBI's Washington Field Office investigated the case, with valuable assistance from the FBI's Seattle Field Office, the U.S. Capitol Police, and the Metropolitan Police Department. The FBI's Washington Field Office identified Thompson as #67 in its seeking information photos.</p>

	In the 11 months since Jan. 6, more than 700 individuals have been arrested in nearly all 50 states for crimes related to the breach of the U.S. Capitol, including over 220 individuals charged with assaulting or impeding law enforcement. The investigation remains ongoing.
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 Judge excoriates ex-King Co. detective
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/charges-tossed-after-judge-rules-king-county-detective-used-racial-stereotypes-false-statements-for-warrant/
GIST	<p>Prosecutors have been forced to dismiss felony drug and gun charges against a Seattle man after a federal judge ruled a decorated former King County sheriff's homicide detective, believing the man was involved in a 2018 gang-related killing, intentionally made false statements and may have relied on racial stereotyping to obtain a search warrant.</p> <p>Former major crimes Detective Kathleen Decker, who last year was named the sheriff's Detective of the Year for the second time, was excoriated in a sealed order issued in July by U.S. District Judge Richard Jones, who threw out the search warrant and all of the evidence gathered as a result of the arrest of Gizachew Wondie in December 2018.</p> <p>Decker, who retired last year after 34 years with the Sheriff's Office, was a "legend" among homicide investigators, according to a Facebook post from the sheriff, and was involved in the Green River Task Force and dozens of high-profile killings and cold cases.</p> <p>The judge's ruling — unsealed along with other documents in the case last week — forced prosecutors in August to dismiss federal drug-distribution and firearms charges filed against Wondie that carried maximum penalties of up to 20 years in prison.</p> <p>Evidence seized as a result of the illegal warrant included a 9 mm handgun, 11,000 Xanax tablets, a pill press, and quantities of cocaine, oxycodone, Adderall, hash oil and marijuana.</p> <p>In response, Wondie earlier this month filed a federal lawsuit against Decker and the King County Sheriff's Office alleging violations of his civil rights, which included his arrest at gunpoint by a SWAT team outside a community college.</p> <p>Wondie was under investigation by the Department of Homeland Security and Seattle police for allegedly selling drugs on Capitol Hill. Those agencies aided the Sheriff's Office after Decker identified him as possibly being involved in the shooting death of 22-year-old Amarah Riley in Seattle in 2018.</p> <p>Jones found that Decker's actions in the investigation were "reckless at a minimum and intentional at best," and determined there was no excuse or reason for a detective of her stature and experience to take the actions she did. The sworn affidavit she submitted to obtain the search warrant contained "materially false and misleading information that was recklessly communicated" to the King County Superior Court judge who issued it, Jones wrote.</p> <p>The Sheriff's Office said it is reviewing the court's order and that it is focused on "delivering justice to Amarah's family."</p> <p>The U.S. Attorney's Office, which prosecuted the case for more than two years before it was dismissed, said in a statement Monday that a search, first of Wondie's car and then his home, turned up significant quantities of drugs. The decision to pursue the case, despite problems with the warrant, reflected "substantial public safety concerns occasioned by the defendant's activities."</p> <p>According to transcripts of hearings held last summer and other documents filed in the case, including the civil lawsuit, Decker was the lead detective investigating the death of Riley, who was shot in the head while driving on Rainier Avenue South on Sept. 19, 2018. Her killing remains unsolved.</p>

As part of her investigation, Decker submitted shell casings from the scene to the Washington State Patrol Crime Laboratory for entry into the National Integrated Ballistic Information Network, which analyzes markings on shell casings and recovered bullets and returns “presumptive” leads of possible matches for further investigation.

However, NIBIN leads are not conclusive and the reports it generates clearly state that a microscopic comparison by a trained ballistics expert is needed for confirmation before any search or arrest warrant can be issued, according to testimony and documents presented during four days of hearings in June.

Decker never sought that confirmation, according to the transcripts of those hearings.

The NIBIN reports also found unconfirmed similarities among the shell casings from the Riley homicide and two other shootings, including a drive-by shooting in Seattle possibly linked to a firearm that had been seized — and returned — to Wondie the year before. Wondie had no criminal history and had a valid concealed-carry permit at the time.

Decker did not order confirmation in those cases either, but instead flatly stated in her sworn affidavit that the gun owned by Wondie was the same one used to kill Riley.

Jones, the judge, said those statements were “false and reckless” and that it stretched credulity to surmise that Decker didn’t know it.

Decker’s warrant stated that “forensic examination has established that shell casing recovered from the [homicide] scene matched a gun known to be owned [by Mr. Wondie],” when Decker knew that the NIBIN reports “are unequivocal in their absence” of any such conclusions, the judge wrote.

“A simple review of the NIBIN clearly demonstrates that these reports do not establish any match or conclude that the shell casings detailed in the report came from ‘the same firearm,’ ” Jones wrote.

“Detective Decker’s sworn declaration to [the judge] about the conclusiveness of her representation was false and reckless.”

In testimony at a hearing in June, Decker said she had a “mixed understanding” of the significance of the NIBIN evidence, and admitted those statements were not true. Jones said the evidence indicated she knew the significance, and ignored it.

“These statements contain far more egregious representations than to be classified as mere negligence,” Jones wrote.

There were other misrepresentations, as well, including some that potentially endangered Wondie’s life. Decker wrote in her affidavit that Wondie had a “propensity for violence,” when there was no evidence other than the fact he owned a firearm and had a permit to carry it.

As a result of that statement, Wondie was arrested — without probable cause — by a heavily armed SWAT team that believed he was involved in a homicide. Wondie was sitting in his car in front of Seattle Central College, where he was a student. Decker acknowledged under questioning that the situation was dangerous to Wondie and others.

She also swore that Wondie, who is Black, was an individual holding a handgun in an Instagram post showing Black men. Decker said Wondie was part of a street gang she believed was responsible for Riley’s death.

However, Wondie’s attorney, federal public defender Mohammad Hamoudi, demonstrated the man in the photo was not Wondie through testimony from defense investigator Michael Stortini, who told Jones that it took him 15 minutes on the internet to debunk Decker’s evidence.

	<p>“The detective engaged in a pattern of recklessness in her identification that far exceeds an excusable case of mistaken identification,” the judge wrote. “The Court has inspected the same photograph and concludes that perhaps racial stereotyping was involved in the detective’s conclusion.”</p> <p>Wondie’s civil attorney, Dan Fiorito, said the case “demonstrates how frail the justice system can be when truth is disregarded in favor of a false and convenient narrative tailored for an expedient result.</p> <p>“Falsely portraying Mr. Wondie as a violent young black man with gang ties in possession of a murder weapon to get a warrant was inexcusable, and yielded a tremendous injustice,” he said.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/20 Lead Capitol riot charge constitutional
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-vb/2021/12/20/lead-capitol-riot-charge-is-constitutional-judges-find/
GIST	<p>Three federal judges have agreed that the most serious charge faced by those accused of participation in the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol is constitutional, a victory for the Justice Department and a blow to the defendants fighting those accusations.</p> <p>The ruling came Monday evening from U.S. District Judge Amit B. Mehta, who is overseeing the prosecutions of more than a dozen people associated with the Oath Keepers, a self-styled militia group. Mehta joins judges Dabney L. Friedrich and Timothy J. Kelly, both of whom have moved to uphold the obstruction charges in other cases.</p> <p>The same legal challenge has been raised by defendants in various Capitol riot prosecutions, from single-person indictments to sprawling conspiracy cases. One judge who has questioned the use of the obstruction charge has yet to rule on the issue.</p> <p>Without that felony charge, prosecutors would be left with only minor charges against many they view as playing a major role in the riot. The Justice Department has avoided charges of sedition, a rarely used law, and not all those accused of acting as key instigators were seen assaulting police officers.</p> <p>The ruling also has broader implications. Rep. Liz Cheney (R-Wyo.) has suggested former president Donald Trump could be charged with obstruction of an official proceeding.</p> <p>Mehta had previously expressed concern that it was unclear what conduct counted as felony “obstruction of an official proceeding” as opposed to misdemeanor disruption of a congressional hearing — a difference between a potential sentence of six months and 20 years behind bars.</p> <p>But after months of consideration and legal arguments on both sides, Mehta ruled that the government had it right.</p> <p>“Their alleged actions were no mere political protest,” he wrote. “They stand accused of combining, among themselves and with others, to force their way into the Capitol building, past security barricades and law enforcement, to ‘Stop, delay, and hinder the Certification of the Electoral College vote.’ ”</p> <p>Defendants had argued that it was unclear whether the certification of President Biden’s victory counted as an “official proceeding.” Charging participants in the Jan. 6 riot with obstruction, they warned, could turn even peaceful protesters into potential felons.</p> <p>Mehta said the “plain text” of the obstruction law covered the group’s actions, and that “even if there were a line of ambiguity ... their alleged acts went well beyond it.” Because the law requires the obstruction to be undertaken “corruptly,” he added, it does not imperil constitutionally protected free speech.</p> <p>Prosecutors say the Oath Keepers prepared for Jan. 6 with “military-style and combat trainings,” Mehta noted, and armed themselves with tactical gear and in some cases bear spray before entering the building.</p>

	<p>According to the government, they stashed guns in a hotel nearby in Virginia. Inside the Capitol, they confronted police. One grabbed an officer and yelled, “Get out of my Capitol!”</p> <p>If those charges are proved at trial, the judge said, “a conviction ... would not violate the First Amendment.”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 Charges: professors working w/China falter
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/criminal-charges-professors-china-mit-faltering-11640016143?mod=hp_lead_pos10
GIST	<p>In January 2020, Gang Chen and about two dozen other professors and students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology traveled to Shenzhen, China, to talk about overlapping university research, visit local companies and interview students interested in studying at MIT.</p> <p>When Mr. Chen landed back at Boston’s Logan airport, Customs and Border Protection agents pulled him aside, seized his laptop and two cellphones and began asking him what he had been doing in China and why. Mr. Chen, a professor of mechanical engineering and an American citizen, told them he had been collaborating with a Chinese university and that all his research had been conducted in the U.S.</p> <p>One year later, he was arrested on charges of concealing extensive ties to China in grant applications he had made to the U.S. government. It was one of a string of attention-grabbing cases brought by the Justice Department to address suspicions that the Chinese government was exploiting academic ties to engage in technological espionage.</p> <p>Since then, the government’s pursuit of academics for alleged lying about their affiliations has faltered.</p> <p>The first such case to go to a jury ended in an acquittal. Out of 24 other cases, nine defendants have pleaded guilty. Charges have been dropped completely in six others, five of which officials said they dismissed because the scientists involved already had been sufficiently punished by being detained or otherwise restricted for a year.</p> <p>The rest are pending, including one against a professor at Harvard University who went on trial on Dec. 14. By comparison, about 92% of the Justice Department’s overall white-collar prosecutions end in convictions.</p> <p>In recent weeks, Justice Department officials have discussed whether to drop additional cases against academics, including Mr. Chen, according to people familiar with the matter. Mr. Chen has pleaded not guilty.</p> <p>The allegations against Mr. Chen and others, which came amid sharp anti-China rhetoric from the Trump administration, sparked criticism from some in academia that the Justice Department was improperly targeting American scientists of Chinese descent—something the department has denied. At a minimum, the cases showed that at times what the Justice Department saw as suspicious contacts between American professors and scientists and government officials in China were something the universities regarded as ordinary academic collaboration.</p> <p>Attorney General Merrick Garland, questioned by a lawmaker in October about the cases, said the new head of the Justice Department’s national security division planned to review the department’s approach to countering threats posed by the Chinese government. A spokesman said that review would be completed soon, and the agency would provide additional information in the coming weeks.</p> <p>Chinese officials have called on the U.S. to halt the effort. In a written statement, Liu Pengyu, a representative of the Chinese Embassy in Washington, said that China’s policies in connection with U.S. scientists “are no different from the common practice of other countries,” and that U.S. authorities</p>

should “stop stigmatizing China’s programs.” The embassy didn’t comment on the details of Mr. Chen’s case.

The U.S. effort seems to have helped Beijing attract Chinese-American scientists to China. More than half a dozen top researchers of Chinese descent said in interviews they had either moved from posts at U.S. universities to China or were looking for a chance to do so, saying they feared becoming a target of what they viewed as Justice Department overreach.

The federal government has estimated that each year more than \$225 billion in intellectual property is lost to China. National-security officials have said publicly that U.S. universities are a key conduit in that loss of technology.

Beginning in about 2018, as the Trump administration criticized a variety of China’s trade and technology practices, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and U.S. agencies that sponsor much university research [began flagging instances](#) where grant recipients appeared to be trying to transfer sensitive technologies to China and to hide Chinese funding when applying for U.S. government support.

Separately, American officials urged universities to [more thoroughly vet certain types of collaborative research with institutions in China](#), citing Chinese law that allows the government to tap any technology or research conducted under such collaborations to advance its own interests.

In 2019, federal prosecutors began charging academics with lying to U.S. grant-giving agencies about their China connections. In the summer of 2020, FBI Director Christopher Wray told lawmakers that the agency was opening a China-related counterintelligence case every 10 hours, and warned that Americans “are the victims of what amounts to Chinese theft on a scale so massive that it represents one of the largest transfers of wealth in human history.”

On Jan. 13, days before President Biden’s inauguration, [prosecutors charged Mr. Chen](#) with failing to disclose some of his ties to China to the Energy Department, which funded some of his research. They alleged he had served as an adviser to the Chinese government, to a Beijing-funded development company and to the board at Shenzhen’s Southern University of Science and Technology, or SUSTech, the institution with which MIT was collaborating.

As agents investigated Mr. Chen, they suspected he had pursued the collaboration at SUSTech not to benefit MIT but to benefit China, according to people familiar with the matter.

“The allegations of the complaint imply that this was not just about greed, but about loyalty to China,” said Andrew Lelling, then the U.S. attorney in Massachusetts, in announcing the case.

In a later filing, lawyers for Mr. Chen, who became a naturalized American citizen in 2000, described Mr. Lelling’s “speculation” about Mr. Chen’s loyalty as “grossly insulting.”

From the moment that charges were filed, MIT has offered [vigorous defenses of its professor and the university’s SUSTech collaboration](#), saying such cooperation was crucial to advancing science. MIT President Rafael Reif called the arrest “deeply distressing and hard to understand.”

In a group letter to Mr. Reif, more than 200 of Mr. Chen’s colleagues wrote: “The complaint against Gang vilifies what would be considered normal academic and research activities, including promoting MIT’s global mission.”

A lawyer for Mr. Chen, Robert Fisher, said his client was grateful for the support and “looks forward to his day in court.”

Mr. Chen was born in 1964 and grew up in China’s Hubei province, where his mother had been forced to move during the Cultural Revolution. His university assigned him to study thermal power, which his

father thought meant he would become a boilermaker. Instead a Chinese-American scientist recruited him to the University of California, Berkeley, where he earned a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering in 1993.

After stints at Duke University and the University of California, Los Angeles, he moved to MIT in 2001, assembling a large research group and churning out papers on topics such as how to use batteries to convert thermal energy into electricity. In 2013, he became head of MIT's mechanical engineering department.

By the mid-2010s, MIT was cultivating ties with China. It received \$125 million from Chinese nationals and organizations between 2015 and 2019, more than any of its university peers, according to self-reported data collected by the Education Department. It also received around \$11 million from [now-blacklisted Chinese telecom giant](#) Huawei Technologies Co., other Education Department data show. The U.S. government alleges that Huawei gear could be used by Beijing to spy globally, which Huawei has denied.

Chinese diplomats in New York often dropped by MIT to visit Chinese students, and they were in frequent contact with Mr. Chen, who was one of the most cited researchers in his field and was well-known in China. Those contacts, captured as the U.S. monitored Chinese diplomats, landed Mr. Chen on the U.S. government's radar, according to people familiar with the matter.

The diplomats asked Mr. Chen to serve in various posts. Mr. Chen spurned some Chinese requests and accommodated others. In 2013, he declined to serve on an advisory panel for the Chinese government, according to people familiar with his activities. The next year, told it would involve minimal effort, he accepted the offer, but there is no record that he followed up or was paid for it, those people said.

In February 2016, China's then vice minister of science and technology, Wang Zhigang, visited Boston and spoke to MIT officials and faculty, including Mr. Chen, both on campus and at a dinner with Chinese-American scientists. In the subsequent complaint against Mr. Chen, prosecutors cited notes he took on his phone that day as evidence of his efforts to advance China's strategic goals.

The most recent convention of the Chinese Communist Party had "scientific innovation placed at core," Mr. Chen had written, noting that the question was "how to promote MIT China collaborations." Mr. Chen later said the notes merely reflected Mr. Wang's words to him.

After the meeting, MIT's associate provost for international affairs, Richard Lester, asked Mr. Chen how China's science ministry could be a partner for MIT in China. "It would seem from today's meeting that there is a possible path forward there," Mr. Lester wrote in an email.

At MIT, officials were particularly interested in Shenzhen, a city adjacent to Hong Kong that had grown into an advanced manufacturing and technology center.

In 2016, Ma Xingrui, then-Communist Party secretary for Shenzhen, pushed visiting U.S. professors for partnerships between the city's institutes and U.S. universities, including the Georgia Institute of Technology and Stanford University. He suggested to Mr. Chen that he consider a collaboration between MIT and SUSTech, the university the city's government had set up to complement the economic growth.

Former national-security officials not connected to Mr. Chen's case said SUSTech's recruitment of scientists with experience at labs run by the U.S. Department of Energy, including the SUSTech's past president, had raised suspicions among government security officials.

MIT officials viewed a SUSTech collaboration favorably, given SUSTech's Western-trained faculty and its decision to teach many classes in English. They believed Shenzhen's manufacturing prowess would be valuable for MIT students to experience.

U.S. investigators were concerned about Mr. Chen's continued contacts with Chinese government officials as he kept them apprised of the SUSTech-MIT plans.

In January 2017, Mr. Chen accompanied a dozen MIT faculty members to SUSTech for a workshop to discuss areas in which the two schools could cooperate.

That February, a Chinese diplomat sent Mr. Chen another note that was flagged by prosecutors. In it, Mr. Chen was told that the science ministry had launched a new area of funding for "key special projects" between China and other governments. The diplomat encouraged Mr. Chen to consider the MIT-SUSTech collaboration as such a project, provided he obtain related U.S. government funding. Mr. Chen never responded.

One month later, Mr. Chen renewed a grant he has received for more than a decade from the Energy Department, to continue his research into how atoms vibrate and carry heat in plastics.

Mr. Chen was reimbursed for his travel to speak at a California conference hosted by ZGC Capital Corp., a Silicon Valley fund affiliated with Zhongguancun Development Group, a company funded by the city of Beijing that was a member of an MIT program that connects faculty with industry.

Prosecutors later alleged he hid from the Energy Department a post ZGC offered him. He turned down the post but continued to work with the Beijing company through the MIT program, people familiar with the matter said.

In the fall of 2017, Mr. Chen took a paid position to mentor students at a middle school in Chongqing, whose headmaster, Wu Xianhong, was the founder of investment company Verakin and had endowed a fellowship at MIT. Mr. Chen gave a speech there, encouraging students not to fear science. Mr. Wu's investment company advertised the affiliation, saying it offered a talent program that had "famous experts and professors from top universities" as tutors. Prosecutors said in the indictment that Mr. Chen hid that post from the U.S. as well. Lawyers for Mr. Chen have argued he was under no obligation to disclose it.

In June 2018, MIT and SUSTech struck a deal under which SUSTech agreed to pay MIT \$25 million over five years. SUSTech would send some faculty members and students to MIT each year, and MIT faculty members and students would travel to Shenzhen. That fall, Mr. Chen took a sabbatical from MIT and spent part of the semester at SUSTech.

That November, MIT continued to expand its engagement with China, hosting with the Chinese Academy of Sciences a science and technology conference in Beijing. MIT's president and Mr. Chen introduced the event.

The event included discussions between MIT professors and the founders of technology companies iFlytek Co. Ltd. and SenseTime. The following year, the U.S. Commerce Department [added both firms to its blacklist](#), accusing them of playing a role in Beijing's repression of Muslim minorities in northwest China. SenseTime described the allegations as unfounded, and iFlytek has said the U.S. move wouldn't have a serious effect on its business. MIT has since terminated a research collaboration with iFlytek.

In 2019, Congress held a hearing in which U.S. national-security officials warned about scientific interactions with China.

That April, MIT said it wouldn't renew its contracts with Huawei, and would intensify its vetting of projects that involved China, Russia or Saudi Arabia. Apparently, it didn't think its January 2020 visit to SUSTech—which preceded Mr. Chen being questioned at the airport—would present any problem.

After Mr. Chen's arrest early this year, Mr. Reif, MIT's president, indicated that MIT and the government appeared to be construing the SUSTech collaboration very differently. "These funds are

about advancing the work of a group of colleagues, and the research and educational mission of MIT,” he said. MIT has continued to pay Mr. Chen’s legal bills.

In a recent LinkedIn post, Mr. Lelling, the former Massachusetts U.S. attorney whose office charged Mr. Chen, said he thought the Justice Department should rethink its efforts to “avoid needlessly chilling scientific and business collaborations with Chinese partners.”

Meanwhile, professors at MIT and SUSTech are continuing their collaborations. University officials say they are still working to figure out how to respond to the growing calls to decouple the U.S. and Chinese economies while maintaining a welcoming research environment.

At an October hearing on research security before a House subcommittee, MIT’s vice president for research, Maria Zuber, said law enforcement and the university would benefit from better understanding each other, given the differences in the ways they work and share information. “It’s a work in progress,” she said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Study: underserved areas gun crime rise
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/20/pandemic-gun-violence-us-communities
GIST	<p>In the first five months of the pandemic, violence increased in the nation’s most underserved communities, according to a recent study from the Violence Prevention Research Program at UC Davis.</p> <p>The study, published on 9 December in the American Journal of Public Health, compared zip codes in 13 major US cities, from Los Angeles to Boston, to see how gun violence affected “disadvantaged” areas versus “privileged” ones based on racial and economic segregation. Researchers compared the rates of gun violence in the given areas from 2018 through 2020. They found that people living in the zip codes that fell in the disadvantaged category were subject to a dramatically higher level of gun violence than their wealthier neighbors were.</p> <p>“Unfortunately the findings were not that surprising. Disparities in violence have existed for a long time and the pandemic was impacting structures in the communities that have endured the greatest burden,” said Julia Schleimer, the study’s lead researcher.</p> <p>Overall, Schleimer and her team found, gun homicides and assaults increased by 27.7% and 4% in March through July of 2020, compared to the average figure for the same period of 2018 and 2019. When the team analyzed zip code-level firearm violence data against the racial makeup and income levels of people within those areas, they found that racial disparities were deeply entrenched in neighborhoods. The locales where low-income Black residents and people of color were concentrated were among the most disadvantaged, and on average each zip code analyzed by Schleimer and her team saw 14 additional incidents of gun firearm violence, 150 more aggravated assaults and five more homicides than the most privileged areas.</p> <p>“This research is measuring the lived experiences of people who live in these communities, it’s not news to them,” Schleimer said. “I would hope that studies like this are illuminating to people who may be unaware of the toll violence takes on communities other than their own.”</p> <p>The findings from Schleimer and her team are backed up by numerous news reports of gun violence hitting Black and Latino communities the hardest and official crime data released by the FBI that revealed the largest single-year increase in homicides in six decades. And while homicides were up across the US, in cities with liberal and conservative leadership, this increase did not affect all locales and racial groups equally. In California, where Black people make up about 6% of the population, they accounted for 31% of the state’s homicide victims in 2020, according to the state attorney general.</p> <p>Schleimer hopes more academics and research institutions will dig into the ways race and economics affect gun violence rates throughout the nation and that these findings will make their way to the eyes of those in power.</p>

	<p>“Around the country we’re talking about racism more broadly and as a nation we need to do a better job of recognizing this history,” Schleimer says. “Having these numbers about gun violence and the research behind them can be important for policymakers who say, ‘Show me the data, show me the evidence.’”</p>
Return to Top	

HEADLINE	12/20 Chicago mayor to federal govt: send help
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/20/chicago-mayor-asks-feds-send-help-stem-gun-crime/
GIST	<p>Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot on Monday said she has asked Attorney General Merrick Garland to send federal agents to the city to help address gun crimes.</p> <p>Ms. Lightfoot, a Democrat, said she requested agents from the Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives Bureau to be deployed to the city for six months to help with gun seizures and investigations.</p> <p>“The flow of illegal guns over our borders continues to be a problem,” she said during a news conference. “The federal government remains uniquely qualified to help cities like Chicago address the scourge of gun violence.”</p> <p>The mayor is also seeking federal marshals to help police track down thousands of people wanted on warrants, more federal prosecutors to handle new cases and multi-jurisdictional task forces to stop illegal gun trafficking.</p> <p>Her request comes as homicides in Chicago have skyrocketed in the last two years. Through Dec. 12, there have been 767 homicides in 2021, up from 739 in 2020 and 477 in 2019. Shootings are up 9% this year compared to the same time last year, going from 3,120 to 3,411.</p> <p>“Our city is simply awash in illegal guns and sadly has been for years,” Ms. Lightfoot said.</p> <p>Police are on track to seize 12,000 illegal firearms this year, which she said up from more than 11,100 guns seized last year.</p> <p>Ms. Lightfoot is also asking the city’s chief criminal court judge to place a moratorium on electronic monitoring for offenders whose lead charge is violent in nature, including murder, sex crimes, carjacking and kidnapping.</p> <p>“Cook County criminal judges have led almost 2,300 offenders with these charges back onto our streets, in our neighborhoods, on our blocks,” she said. “It simply defies common sense. It’s not safe, and this practice must be stopped immediately.”</p> <p>There are currently about 3,400 people on electronic monitoring, which she said is nearly double the amount prior to the pandemic.</p> <p>The city, she said, is in a crisis and “has reached a tipping point.”</p> <p>“Too many of our neighborhoods are up for grabs, too many people are being murdered by offenders out of electronic monitoring,” she said.</p> <p>More than 50 people on electronic monitors have been arrested this year for a shooting or murder, according to the mayor.</p> <p>“The bottom line, ladies and gentlemen, is that the Cook County criminal courts current practices around electronic monitoring in violent dangerous offenders, makes our residents less safe, totally erodes confidence in the criminal justice system and is a slap in the face to victims and survivors,” she said.</p>

Ms. Lightfoot, however, said she is not blaming the courts for the rise in violent crime.

“Now let’s be clear: this is not about finger-pointing or shifting,” she said. “We all have a role to play and we must be accountable.”

The mayor also said Chicago is not alone in dealing with an uptick in violent crime.

“New York will end the year up in homicides and shootings, and so will Los Angeles,” she said. “Cities like Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, St. Louis, Denver, and even cities that rarely experience crime like Austin, Texas – all of us for the last two years have been experiencing historic highs and gun violence that is tearing all of us and our residents [apart].”

A recent survey shows more than 80% of U.S. voters are concerned about the wave of violent crime spreading across the country.

Rasmussen Reports released a report last Wednesday that shows 89% of likely voters are concerned about violent crime, including more than half (69%) of whom are “very” concerned. The statistics are up from July when 79% said they were concerned, including 49% who were very concerned.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi last week also acknowledged the country’s crime surge.

“The fact [is] that there is an attitude of lawlessness in our country that springs from I don’t know where ... but we cannot have that lawlessness,” said Mrs. Pelosi.

The Justice Department did not respond to a request for comment sent Monday.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 Haiti missionaries in dramatic escape
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/us/haiti-missionaries-escape.html
GIST	<p>The 12 missionaries who were freed from captivity in Haiti last week had staged a dramatic escape on Wednesday night, making their way past guards and traveling on foot for about 10 miles while carrying two small children, their missionary organization said on Monday.</p> <p>“They found a way to open the door that was closed and blocked, filed silently to the path that they had chosen to follow and quickly left the place that they were held, despite the fact that numerous guards were close by,” Weston Showalter, the spokesman for Christian Aid Ministries, said at a news briefing at the organization’s home office in Ohio, recounting the story for the first time.</p> <p>The account of the escape comes solely from the U.S. missionary group. The police and government officials in Haiti did not respond to requests for comment on the incident. The F.B.I. declined to comment beyond an earlier statement expressing gratitude for the safe release of the hostages.</p> <p>The ordeal began two months ago, when the group was kidnapped by a gang called 400 Mawozo in a neighborhood of Port-au-Prince after visiting an orphanage. Gang members surrounded its van, penning the missionaries in with two vehicles, and then took them to a small house. The missionaries were held in a small room, about 10 by 12 feet, Mr. Showalter said.</p> <p>The group that escaped included a married couple, a 10-month-old baby, a 3-year-old child, a 14-year-old girl, a 15-year-old boy, four men and two women, he said. Five other members of the group had been released during the past month.</p> <p>For days, Mr. Showalter said, the missionaries prayed that God would reveal the right moment for their escape.</p>

Twice when they planned to flee, God told them to wait, he said. But on Wednesday night, the missionaries put on their shoes and packed water in their clothes. They used a mountain as a landmark and followed the light of the moon and “the sure guidance of the stars,” he said.

As daylight broke, they found someone to help them make a phone call. Later that day, they were on a Coast Guard flight to Florida.

“They were finally free,” Mr. Showalter said, through tears.

It was not clear how the missionaries escaped their guards after weeks of being held captive under close watch.

The organization said that an unspecified ransom had been provided but did not describe the money as leading directly to the hostages’ freedom. Instead David N. Troyer, general director of Christian Aid Ministries, said that “after many days of waiting and no action on the part of the kidnappers, God worked in a miraculous way to enable the hostages to escape.”

Some people, who were not identified, “provided funds to pay a ransom and allow the negotiation process to continue,” Mr. Troyer said. “We are not able to say anything further in respect to these negotiations.”

A State Department spokesman would not comment on the episode but noted that the U.S. government did not pay ransoms. A person familiar with the negotiations said a third party paid the ransom, not the U.S. government.

Pierre Espérance, a prominent human rights defender in Haiti, said the missionaries’ description of their experience was very unusual — mass kidnappings in the past have been resolved by the payment of a ransom.

Kidnapping has become the main security threat in Haiti over the past year, as the country slipped deeper into an economic and political crisis. Faced with a power vacuum after the death of President Jovenel Moïse in July, and with a rapidly shrinking legal economy, gangs in the capital of Port-au-Prince have increasingly resorted to kidnapping for ransom to finance themselves, targeting even pastors in their churches and doctors fighting the coronavirus pandemic.

The gang that kidnapped the Christian Aid Ministries group also held other hostages in the same building, Mr. Showalter said, and the missionaries tried to talk with them through the walls, or share food and water with them. The group sang, prayed, and recited Scripture verses throughout the days and nights.

The captors provided “large amounts of baby food” for the small children, he said, and the adults received small portions of food, including things like half a hard-boiled egg, or rice and beans with a fish sauce. They had limited access to clean drinking water and some hygiene items, but the water they received to bathe in was “severely contaminated,” he said, and some people developed “festering sores.”

The hostages spoke to the gang leader on several occasions, he said, and warned him of God’s eventual judgment if he and the gang members continued their behavior.

“Although they were threatened on multiple occasions and even wondered if death was near in some cases, none of the hostages were physically hurt or abused by the kidnappers,” he said.

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 As Europe returns artifacts, Britain silent
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/arts/design/parthenon-marbles-restitution.html
GIST	LONDON — In 1984, Neil Kinnock, then leader of Britain’s opposition Labour Party, did something few politicians here have dared: He pledged to return the Parthenon Marbles.

Those classical sculptures, often called the Elgin Marbles after the British aristocrat who removed them from the Parthenon in the early 1800s and brought them to London, were “a moral issue,” [Kinnock told reporters](#) during a visit to Athens. “The Parthenon without the marbles is like a smile with a missing tooth,” he said.

Kinnock’s comments made headlines at the time, but when he returned to London, he found that few in his party shared his views, let alone Conservative members of Margaret Thatcher’s government. He didn’t push the idea.

Most of his successors, [including Tony Blair](#), insisted the marbles should stay put in the British Museum, as one of its highlights.

Last week, the sculptures returned to public view after a prolonged closure of the museum’s Greek galleries caused by the coronavirus pandemic and maintenance work. They reappeared as activists around Europe are clamoring to rectify perceived historical injustices, yet the idea of returning the marbles to Athens seems to have as little political support here as it did in Kinnock’s day.

The British government’s official position is that it is not responsible for the marbles’ fate: That, it says, is a matter for the British Museum’s trustees, a group largely appointed by the prime minister that has repeatedly said the sculptures are integral to the museum’s mission of telling world history.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson — an Oxford classics graduate who loves to quote ancient Greek — has for years said the marbles belong in London. In 2012, when he was London’s mayor, [he wrote to a Greek official](#) saying he “had reflected deeply over many years” on the sculptures, and, as much as he sympathized with the Greek case, it would be “a grievous and irremediable loss” if they left the British Museum.

When Johnson met with Greece’s prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, last month, [he reiterated the government position](#) that anything to do with the marbles was a question for British Museum trustees, not him.

Throughout 2021, as other European governments announced restitution policies and gave items back, Britain’s buck-passing on the marbles looked increasingly out of step.

In April, Germany said it would start returning around [1,100 looted artifacts known as the Benin Bronzes](#) from its museums to Nigeria, beginning next year.

In June, Belgium’s government [agreed to a plan to transfer ownership](#) of stolen artifacts in its museums to their African countries of origin.

In October, President Emmanuel Macron of France [returned 26 looted items to Benin](#), building on [a 2017 pledge](#) to hand back African art from the country’s museums.

Yet in Britain, a one-time colonial and trading power whose museums are stuffed with treasures from its former possessions, restitution is not even on the political agenda. Neither the government, nor the opposition Labour party, has issued a policy statement on the subject, and there has been no debate on the issue in Parliament.

Current and former British lawmakers said there were a host of reasons for the lack of action. Kinnock, 79, said in an email that the government, and much of the British public, had the tendency “to cling to (or even yearn for) a real or imagined past.”

Returning artifacts would be seen as “woke,” Kinnock added, and the government treats that “as vampires treat sunlight.”

John Hayes, a Conservative Party lawmaker and chair of [an influential right-wing group in Parliament called Common Sense](#), said that Belgium, France and Germany were returning items to their former colonies to improve relations, but Britain had much better connections with its prior imperial possessions.

By doing nothing on restitution, British lawmakers were being “more sensible” than their continental counterparts, he said, adding that the belief that all items should be returned to their countries of origin was “a preposterous position,” with no logical end.

By tradition, Britain’s government does not interfere in the day-to-day running of museums it funds. But the current government has recently applied pressure to shape their policies. Last year, Oliver Dowden, the country’s culture minister at the time, wrote to museum leaders, telling them to “retain and explain” disputed monuments, like statues of slave owners, rather than removing them from view.

Dowden also made his own views on restitution clear, [telling a British TV station](#) in September that Benin Bronzes in the British Museum “properly reside” in the collection.

Activists say the government could take action on the Parthenon Marbles if it wanted to. Artemis Papathanassiou, a member of a committee under Greece’s culture ministry that works for the reunification of the Parthenon Marbles, said that since Britain’s government sets the rules for major museums and often appoints their trustees, it should get involved. “They just don’t want to take responsibility,” she said.

In September, a UNESCO committee on returning contested artifacts said the dispute over the marbles “has an intergovernmental character and, therefore, the obligation to return the Parthenon sculptures lies squarely on the United Kingdom government.”

Yet lawmakers insist the matter is out their hands, even though, under [the 1963 law that governs the British Museum](#), the trustees can only remove items from the collection if they are “unfit to be retained” and “can be disposed of without detriment to the interests of students.”

Samantha Knights, a lawyer working on restitution cases, said that the law was so vague that it potentially gave the trustees some leeway. When Elgin took the marbles, Greece was part of the Ottoman Empire; he had a permit to make excavations at the Parthenon, though it is unclear whether he had permission to remove anything. Knights said the trustees “could decide that, because of the history of the way the Parthenon Marbles came to be acquired, and the very powerful arguments of the Greek government for their return, they are now ‘unfit to be retained,’” she said.

“But whether the trustees would be prepared to come to that conclusion is another question,” Knights added.

The British Museum’s trustees do not seem in the mood for giving back.

Since September, the board has been led by George Osborne, a former Conservative lawmaker who was Britain’s finance chief from 2010 to 2016. Osborne did not respond to several interview requests for this article, but in [an opinion piece in the Times of London](#) earlier this month, he said the museum was “open to lending our artifacts to anywhere who can take good care of them and ensure their safe return,” including Greece. The Greek government has [previously rejected offers](#) to borrow the Parthenon Marbles, holding out for their permanent return.

Hartwig Fischer, the British Museum’s director, also declined to be interviewed but said in an emailed statement that the marbles helped visitors “gain an insight into the cultures of the world and how they interconnect over time.” [The museum’s website](#) explains that the sculptures “convey the influences between Egyptian, Persian, Greek and Roman” civilizations, and argues they are best presented in this context.

Janet Suzman, an actor and the chair of the British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles, said she hoped changing attitudes around the world to where African artifacts belong would

influence views on the marbles. In November, a survey by YouGov, a polling organization, [said 59 percent of the British public](#) believes the marbles belong in Greece.

But Osborne's appointment had made her "much less hopeful" about the cause, Suzman said. "Nobody is appointed to the British Museum unless you swear on your mother's grave that you won't be returning anything," she said.

Kinnock, the former Labour leader, said that he felt "rather forlorn" when he considered the chances of the marbles being returned. Other European governments had their own reasons for returning disputed items, he said: Germany, for instance, had a "clearly different" attitude toward restitution, perhaps influenced by national reflections on its roles in World War II and "the comparative brevity" of its empire.

Change in Britain will "only come with a different government that would, in various ways, seek to improve the U.K.'s perception of its history," he said. "Then," he added, "there would be a strong possibility that our admirable country will be Great Britain in 21st Century terms."

[Return to Top](#)

HEADLINE	12/20 El Chapo sons organize drug cartel festival
SOURCE	https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10330161/El-Chapos-sons-away-cars-toys-residents-Mexico-ahead-Christmas.html
GIST	<p>The fugitive sons of Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán reportedly organized a bash ahead of Christmas Day as cars were raffled and gifts were handed out to residents in the western Mexico state of Sinaloa.</p> <p>Videos of the narco fiesta, which recently took place in an unknown town in the city of Culiacán, showed several bands performing live for the invitees, including those who were lucky enough to drive home in eight brand new cars.</p> <p>Footage also showed rows of toys and other goods piled together with a black sticker that carried El Chapo's initials.</p> <p>The event held by the jail drug lord's four sons, Ovidio Guzmán López, Joaquín Guzmán López, Ivan Archivaldo Guzmán, Jesús Alfredo Guzmán - otherwise known as Los Chapitos - was in commemoration of the 'posada,' a religious tradition celebrated in Mexico and Latin America that recalls the journey that Mary and Joseph took on in search of a safe refuge for Mary to give birth to Jesus.</p> <p>While the posadas are usually celebrated between December 16 and December 24, the exact date and location of the outdoors festival is unknown.</p> <p>'We do not have information about any posada that Mr. Guzmán's children have made,' a Culiacán police official told online news outlet Grillonautas.</p> <p>A Jalisco state public security official told the outlet that while they were unaware of any events held in public by the cartel and El Chapo's sons, it was something to be expected of them because they are well known in the northern region of the State.</p> <p>The cartel held a similar event in December 2020 in San Diego, a neighborhood in the Culiacán of borough of El Dorado. But that party - attended by as many as 800 guests - was shut down by the military due to COVID-19 measures that prohibited mass gatherings.</p> <p>Their son follow the steps of their father and his former associate Pablo Escobar, who often gave away lavish gifts as a show of gratitude to those who displayed loyalty to him, especially during Christmas.</p> <p>Colombian drug lord Escobar once ordered the construction of more than 200 homes for poor families living in the Medellin slum of Moravia, and also built more than 50 soccer pitches. He also made his henchmen delivers loads of gifts ahead of Christmas.</p>

The leaked videos came on the heels of last Wednesday's announcement that the U.S. Department of State was offering four \$5 million rewards for any information that could lead to the arrest and/or convictions of Los Chapitos.

'For years, the United States has been in the grips of the worst drug epidemic in its history, driven by overdose deaths involving heroin and illicitly manufactured fentanyl and an increase in methamphetamine availability,' the Department of State said in a statement. 'Transnational criminal organizations are largely responsible for bringing these drugs and related violence to our communities.'

Ivan Archivaldo Guzmán-Salazar and Jesús Alfredo Guzmán-Salazar were born after their kingpin father married Alejandrina María Salazar Hernández in 1977.

Ovidio Guzmán-López and Joaquín Guzmán-López were born out of El Chapo's marriage in the 1980s to Griselda López Pérez, with whom he had two other children, Édgar and Griselda Guadalupe.

The Department of State said Guzmán-Salazar brothers rose to power in the Sinaloa Cartel took place after their father was arrested and subsequently extradited to the United States, where he was convicted and is now facing a life sentence at a Colorado super maximum facility prison.

The Guzmán-Salazar siblings, federal investigators allege, 'provided significant operational assistance to their father, including coordinating the transport of narcotics from Central and South America to Mexico; coordinating the transport of narcotics into the United States; distributing drugs to wholesale customers in the United States; and collecting drug proceeds from customers in the United States for transfer to Mexico for the benefit of Sinaloa Cartel members and associates.'

Meanwhile, the Guzmán-López brothers came into prominence following the murder of their brother, Édgar, who was murdered in May 2008.

They established the Guzmán-López Transnational Criminal Organization under the cartel and invested their money into the purchase of marijuana in Mexico and cocaine from Colombia that later trafficked into the United States. The brothers also bought massive loads of ephedrine from suppliers in Argentina that was smuggled over to Mexico as the ventured into the production of methamphetamine.

The Guzmán-López currently run about 11 methamphetamine secret laboratories throughout the family home state of Sinaloa. Their network produces around 3,000 to 5,000 pounds of methamphetamine on a monthly basis before its sold to other Sinaloa Cartel members as well distributors who operate for the criminal organization in the United States and Canada.

Of the four siblings, Ovidio Guzmán López is the only one who came close to joining his father in a U.S. prison.

He escaped being extradited to the United States on October 17, 2019 when the Mexican military tracked him down to a home in Culiacán, Sinaloa, after an arrest warrant was issued by a Washington, D.C., federal court judge as the U.S. sought to dismantle the cartel's alleged fentanyl trafficking operations.

However, chaos ensued in the streets of Culiacán as cartel fighters led an assault that overwhelmed the armed forces and local police, who were met with grenade launchers and rifles.

Video showed Ovidio Guzmán López instructing Iván Archivaldo Guzmán via a phone to order their operatives to stand down.

Under orders of President López Obrador, security forces released Ovidio Guzmán López and withdrew from the residence.

	By then at least 13 people had been killed in the military-like assault that was waged by cartel henchmen, who had also kidnapped military officials before releasing them.
Return to Top	
HEADLINE	12/20 Mexico seizures meth, fentanyl soar
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/mexico-sees-seizures-meth-fentanyl-soar-2019-81864281
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY -- Mexican drug cartels are turning to bigger, more productive labs to churn out increasing quantities of synthetic drugs like meth and fentanyl, according to seizure figures issued Monday by the country's Defense Department.</p> <p>The defense secretary, Gen. Luis Cresencio Sandoval, acknowledged there has been a huge shift by Mexican cartels away from naturally grown drugs like opium and marijuana, where seizures and crop eradication has fallen.</p> <p>But he said seizures of the synthetic opioid fentanyl soared 525% in the first three years of the current administration, which took office Dec. 1, 2018, compared to the previous three years. Law enforcement seized 1,232 pounds (559 kilograms) of fentanyl in 2016-2018 and 7,710 pounds (3,497 kilograms) in 2019-2021.</p> <p>Part of that increase was due to increased overall use of fentanyl, which Mexican cartels import from China and then press into pills or mix into other drugs.</p> <p>"There was a change in consumption, there was a change in drug markets due to the ease of producing synthetic drugs," Sandoval said. For example, cartels no longer have to pay farmers to grow opium poppies and painstakingly collect the opium past that oozes from the bulbs.</p> <p>The change was reflected in a drop of more than 50% in the amount of opium poppy fields destroyed in the last three years. And with legalization of pot in many U.S. states, eradication of marijuana fields in Mexico also dropped by about half.</p> <p>Seizures of methamphetamines, meanwhile, more than doubled. Meth seizures rose from 120,100 pounds (54,521 kilograms) in 2016-2018 to almost 275,000 pounds (124,735 kilograms) in the last three years, an increase of 128%.</p> <p>Mexican cartels are increasingly turning to huge, industrial-scale labs to churn out synthetic drugs.</p> <p>Sandoval said the number of drug labs raided fell from 287 in 2016-2018 to 203 over the last three years. But those that were detected were bigger, he added.</p> <p>"The laboratories that have been discovered or seized in this administration have had larger capacities, which has allowed us to seize a larger quantity of methamphetamine products," Sandoval said.</p> <p>Mexico's synthetic drug boom was illustrated last week when a trucker from Mexico was arrested after trying to smuggle record-breaking amounts of meth and fentanyl into the U.S.</p> <p>More than 17,500 pounds (7,930 kilograms) of meth and 389 pounds (176 kilograms) of fentanyl were discovered Thursday hidden inside a tractor-trailer at the Otay Mesa border crossing in San Diego, according to a statement from the U.S. Attorney's Office.</p> <p>The seizures were the largest of either drug in the U.S. for both 2020 and 2021, the statement said.</p> <p>Sandoval touted the increased seizures in Mexico as a sign of the government's success.</p> <p>But Mexican security analyst Alejandro Hope noted that "an increase in seizures can be a very bad sign."</p>

	<p>“It could be because of a greater effort, or it could be because there is a greater volume” of illegal drugs being produced, he said.</p> <p>Hope said that external indicators — like the record bust last week at Otay Mesa — suggest Mexican authorities "haven't affected the flow in the least.”</p> <p>Mexican cartels press fentanyl into counterfeit oxycodone and other pills, which often contain lethal amounts of the synthetic opioid. That has caused about 64,000 overdose deaths in the United States over the last year.</p> <p>Anne Milgram, the head of the Drug Enforcement Administration, told CBS’s “Face the Nation” that “the cartels are mass producing these pills in Mexico, mostly, and they’re making them look like they’re real oxycodone, like they’re real hydrocodone, Percocet, Adderall, and then they’re bringing them flooding into the United States and falsely advertise them, marketing them as though they were real pharmaceuticals.”</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/20 Osaka arson suspect copied Kyoto attack?
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/osaka-fire-suspect-copied-kyoto-animation-attack-81871238
GIST	<p>TOKYO -- The suspect in a deadly fire at a mental health clinic in Osaka last week might have studied the fatal 2019 Kyoto Animation studio arson while preparing his own attack that killed 25 people, police said Tuesday.</p> <p>Osaka police have identified 61-year-old Morio Tanimoto as the prime suspect in Friday's fire at the clinic on the fourth floor of an eight-story building in Osaka’s main business district of Kitashinchi. The blaze also left two people severely injured, including Tanimoto.</p> <p>The incident sent shockwaves across the country and recalled the deadly arson in Kyoto two years ago.</p> <p>While searching the suspect's house, police found a months-old newspaper containing an article on the 2019 attack on the Kyoto Animation studio, indicating Tanimoto might have been inspired by it, an Osaka police investigator told The Associated Press on Tuesday on condition of anonymity because of department rules.</p> <p>In the Kyoto Animation case, an attacker stormed into the building, spread gasoline near the entrance and set the building on fire, causing an explosion and killing 36 people and injuring more than 30 others. The incident shocked Japan and drew an outpouring of grief from anime fans worldwide.</p> <p>Tanimoto purchased 10 liters (2.6 gallons) of gasoline in November in apparent preparation, police said.</p> <p>Tanimoto, who is severely injured and unconscious, is being treated in a hospital and has not been arrested or charged. One of the severely injured victims from the attack died in a hospital, bringing the fire's death toll to 25, police said Tuesday.</p> <p>Officials believe the death toll at the downtown Osaka building was high because the fire was started near the floor's only stairway, leaving many people trapped inside while smoke and heat quickly filled the space, the Fire and Disaster Management Agency said.</p> <p>A security camera at the clinic showed a man walking into the reception area with a paper bag, which he put on the floor and kicked. As liquid poured out of the bag, he ducked down and moved his hand, and then a blaze shot up to the ceiling, with flames and smoke erupting.</p> <p>In the footage, the man believed to be Tanimoto is seen moving farther into the clinic, where there was no emergency exit, the police official said, adding that it was not known whether he had a suicidal intent.</p>

	<p>The skilled metal worker has had troubled relationships with his family and served a prison term for stabbing his own son in 2011 with a knife in a forced suicide attempt, Japanese media reported. His brother told the media that Tanimoto had distanced himself from the family and they haven't been in touch for about 30 years.</p> <p>Autopsy results showed most victims died from inhaling carbon monoxide and had few burns or other external injuries, police said Tuesday. The clinic's psychiatrist, Kotaro Nishizawa, was among the victims.</p> <p>Witnesses and investigators have suggested that the victims struggled to find their way out of the clinic as they gasped for air. Most were found to have collapsed while headed to the other end of the clinic, only to find there was no alternative exit.</p> <p>The government has launched a nationwide inspection of buildings with three or more stories and only one stairway as part of an effort to step up safety measures.</p>
	Return to Top

HEADLINE	12/20 Interpol: illicit trafficking of firearms
SOURCE	https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2021/Asia-Thousands-of-firearms-destroyed-following-counter-terrorism-operation
GIST	<p>LYON, FRANCE: Terrorism and organized crime are invariably linked to the illicit trafficking of firearms, often across borders.</p> <p>A recent INTERPOL-led operation codenamed Trigger-Salvo saw law enforcement from 10 countries in Central, East and Southeast Asia coordinate in a series of border enforcement actions aimed at preventing firearms trafficking and detecting any links with terrorism and organized crime.</p> <p>During a two-week period (25 October – 5 November), participating law enforcement agencies conducted enhanced passenger and cargo controls at designated airports, seaports, and land borders as well as at known smuggling routes within the participating countries. Data from the screening of individuals, travel documents and vehicles was then cross-checked against INTERPOL's global databases, enabling officers to identify wanted persons and potential threats.</p> <p>The operation notably saw Mongolian law enforcement destroy a cache of 2,000 illegal firearms, seized over a period of three years.</p> <p>“Mongolia’s decision to destroy these firearms symbolises our commitment to Operation Trigger-Salvo and to enhancing security in the wider region,” said Police Lieutenant Colonel Nyamdavaa Bayasgalan, Chief Inspector of Mongolia’s INTERPOL National Central Bureau in Ulaanbaatar.</p> <p>Three million searches</p> <p>In total, nearly 3 million searches were conducted during Operation Trigger-Salvo, yielding more than 140 hits. The vast majority concerned individuals using travel documents reported lost or stolen and 19 individuals subject to INTERPOL Red Notices were also detected.</p> <p>Through cargo inspections, nearly 34,000 packages and mail items were screened while more than 1,200 packages and general cargo were thoroughly inspected. Meanwhile, more than 12,000 vehicles were searched.</p> <p>These checks led to the seizure of more than 800 firearm parts and 22 firearms, as well as nearly 10,000 ecstasy tablets worth approximately EUR 290,000.</p> <p>More than 1,800 immigration-related offences were also detected, resulting in 64 arrests for people smuggling and five Thai nationals arrested for facilitating, transporting, and allowing the illegal entry of a person or persons across the Thai-Myanmar Border. The migrants smuggled were being brought to work illegally in Central Thailand.</p>

Mobile phone stun guns

Many of the firearms parts seized during Operation Trigger-Salvo were uncovered by law enforcement in Hong Kong (China), including 750 during a single inspection of an express consignment en route to Italy. In another case at the Hong Kong International Airport several days later, customs officials recovered 10 stun guns disguised as ordinary electronics such as mobile phones and vehicle transponders.

“Curbing the transnational flow of illegal weapons in Central, East and Southeast Asia is challenging due to porous borders, difficult terrain, regional conflicts, the drug trade, and the presence of terrorist groups and organized crime syndicates,” said Karel Pelan, Assistant Director, Terrorist Networks at INTERPOL.

“Operations like Trigger-Salvo demonstrate that concrete results can be achieved in the fight against firearms trafficking when law enforcement coordinates internationally and leverages INTERPOL capabilities to keep these weapons out of the wrong hands.”

The successes of Operation Trigger-Salvo were made possible through close collaboration between the following participating countries: Brunei, Cambodia, China (including the Chinese jurisdictions of Hong Kong and Macau), Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

Operation Trigger-Salvo was funded by the Government of the People’s Republic of China and supported by ASEANAPOL and the World Customs Organization.

[Return to Top](#)

Information From Online Communities and Unclassified Sources/InFOCUS is a situational awareness report published daily by the Washington State Fusion Center.

If you no longer wish to receive this report, please submit an email to intake@wsfc.wa.gov and enter UNSUBSCRIBE InFOCUS in the Subject line.

DISCLAIMER – the articles highlighted within InFOCUS is for informational purposes only and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Washington State Fusion Center, the City of Seattle, the Seattle Police Department or the Washington State Patrol and have been included only for ease of reference and academic purposes.

FAIR USE Notice All rights to these copyrighted items are reserved. Articles and graphics have been placed within for educational and discussion purposes only, in compliance with 'Fair Use' criteria established in Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976. The principle of 'Fair Use' was established as law by Section 107 of The Copyright Act of 1976. 'Fair Use' legally eliminates the need to obtain permission or pay royalties for the use of previously copyrighted materials if the purposes of display include 'criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research.' Section 107 establishes four criteria for determining whether the use of a work in any particular case qualifies as a 'fair use'. A work used does not necessarily have to satisfy all four criteria to qualify as an instance of 'fair use'. Rather, 'fair use' is determined by the overall extent to which the cited work does or does not substantially satisfy the criteria in their totality. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes of your own that go beyond 'fair use,' you must obtain permission from the copyright owner. For more information go to: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>

THIS DOCUMENT MAY CONTAIN COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL. COPYING AND DISSEMINATION IS PROHIBITED WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNERS.

Source: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>

